



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION
MEMO

From the Desk of Jay Nichols

House Education Testimony COVID 19. March 27, 2020

Intro:

- Thank you, House Education Committee Members, for your work and your continued support of public education in the state of Vermont, especially during this crisis.
- I think as human beings, especially in education, we look at things often through a deficit model; and that makes sense because educators, especially school leaders, tend to focus on problem solving. We look at students and our schools and try to constantly help them improve. Because of that mindset, we sometimes don't celebrate and focus on the successes enough. So while there are some successes to report, much of my testimony will center around concerns. I'm breaking up my testimony into four big buckets: 1. Social-emotional; 2. Services and Community Support; 3. Equity and Infrastructure; and, 4. Curriculum and Instruction. My analysis is based on conversations with 73 school leaders in Vermont. In each bucket, I share from principals overall what is going well, what is not going so well, and thoughts to consider for the future.

1. SOCIO-EMOTIONAL

What is going well

- Teachers and support staff are working hard at connecting with students. Some through video, some cell service, and some calling landlines. Staff are writing letters to students, emailing students, and finding other ways to

connect. In this new paradigm people are trying to support each other as best they can.

- School leaders are working hard to track those students who are likely to fall through the cracks. We worry about making parent contact and getting substantive engagement for those students who really need to be in the building to learn.
- Many parents are doing a wonderful job under hard conditions, while still managing their own family dynamics as relates to the Stay Safe, Stay Home order.

What is not going so well

- Some of the families in the younger grades wish the Chrome Books had not come home, too much tech for their kids. No one is being nasty, just very "real" and saying keeping their family sane during this crisis is the major goal.
- We have heard from some families that they are "done". With their current situations, the school work is just not a priority. There has been some pushback from families trying to hold it all together AND having to monitor schoolwork. This will only grow if we expect parents to essentially homeschool while trying to keep their lives together. Teachers are concerned about how this will even be manageable over time. They are doing everything they can but parents are already beginning to disengage.
- We know that students need socialization. It is clear that they are missing this. All the benefits of athletics and activities are lost right now. The Governor's announcement last night has discouraged children and families across the state in this regard. Although we hold out hope that some activities and athletics may still occur this school year if this pandemic subsides

Thoughts for the future

- While the response has been overwhelmingly positive, this crisis has also exposed inequities that we have known about for years. Students without Internet, families without basic resources such as food, heat, and clothing, students needing mental health services not provided through community agencies, students living in transient or abusive environments, families struggling with addiction and being unable to provide a stable and safe environment for students. Schools have essentially built social service agencies within our walls and using our own resources, and if closure extends for a long period of time, the needs that have been addressed with school resources will go unmet and create potentially damaging and

dangerous situations for students. We should never again complain about the cost of education given what people should now know about what schools do on a daily basis that is far beyond traditional education.

- The social/emotional well-being of our students and families is a huge concern going forward. Routines have been ripped away and for the children that thrive on routine and clear expectations this is a very scary and confusing time. They will likely communicate this via some challenging behaviors, which may further stress already stressed home environments. I worry for the students and I worry that many parents may not have the capacity to manage this safely. Students that have attachment challenges will feel this in a way that may be traumatic and have a lasting impact on their ability to reconnect. Maintaining strong connections with many children is almost impossible and the longer we are away from school the harder it will be.
- All students are at greater risk with increased stress in the home. This pandemic will certainly have a long lasting trauma effect on many students and our society at large.

2. SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

What is going well:

- Many had planned ahead of this closure, so were able to respond pretty well. Food Service in many places is functioning very well in making and delivering meals.
- Many districts already have one-to-one internet devices for grades 3 and up so infrastructure is in place in those systems to eliminate the barrier of devices. However, many kids have devices they can use but don't have internet
- We are hearing more and more about parent layoffs which is hitting harder now. For these families providing meals has been essential and a huge relief.
- The level of cooperation and collaboration between and among parents, students, teachers, support staff, admins and others is amazing. The response to this crisis has unleashed the collective power of creativity, will-power, and resiliency of Vermonters. There is no doubt we will work through this and likely be stronger and better for it in the end.
- Parents are doing great work to try to work under hard conditions, many at home, while still managing their own working lives.

What is not going so well:

- Folks are overwhelmed with trying to meet their children's needs with learning amongst everything else they must do. Many principals are sharing worries about provisions possibly being reduced due to shipping especially as it relates to food service. Many worries about food preparation and distribution and how long this can be effectively sustained.
- Schools without technology tools, systems, and support are struggling greatly and communities, and areas of communities, with less of these resources will struggle the most.

Thoughts for the future

- How are we going to provide meals as people start getting sick?
- How can we provide food for all kids, not just the FRL students? Is this a time when we should be providing food free to all kids.

3 EQUITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

What is going well?

- Many districts have one to one devices already in place.
- Some districts are actively purchasing devices and getting them into kids hands as we speak.
- Staff members are working far over 8-hour-days. This has been really challenging, even though from our perspective, it is going pretty well. It is a credit to staff everywhere. But there is stress from the high workload and worry about students.

What isn't going so well?

- Many families lacking internet or high speed internet. They cannot get internet in remote places or often cell service either. Internet & connectivity issues are profound around the state
- Many kids need paper copies of things, which requires staffing at buildings. Many students can't access materials due to lack of skills/knowledge where they need a live teacher with them
- Not just about lack of internet. Many parents are not able to provide a suitable work environment or academic help. Many of our students need to watch their siblings or an elderly grandparent. Some of the rural poor value their privacy above all and will not give us permission even to drop things off at their houses.
- Online learning doesn't work for our youngest students. No devices for students - and do we really want them on screens all day?

- The gap between the families that have and the families that don't have will increase (as a community, a state, a nation, a world). We will be widening the achievement gaps that already exist.
- Is this the tipping point where we will recognize that broadband internet access is no longer a luxury or option but should be a right to all Vermonters? We are currently creating an alternative schooling system that creates huge disadvantages to many of our already disadvantaged homes. With an elongated dismissal, many of our economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities (not to mention the compounding intersection of students who fall in both categories) will be vastly behind and our gap for achievement will be widened.

Thoughts for the future?

- No internet or at least not reliable internet for many, parents who don't speak English, parents under stress trying to homeschool, families that are ill trying to homeschool, adapting to students with IEP's, especially students with intensive needs...this is NOT education.. Printing out packets of worksheets for 11 weeks is not learning
- If we are supposed to move to a virtual model, equity demands that internet access be treated as a public good, and not a for-profit enterprise. It needs to be like roads and bridges, and the "last mile" problem needs a solution.

4. CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

What is going well:

- Teachers are providing maintenance work
- Teachers started planning early before the closure, and now are in full swing, moving instruction online for those grades. Many Grades below 4-12 have distributed learning through paper packets. Students are generally responding well
- Educators have stepped up and handled a very steep learning curve - under the stress of a pandemic. Amazing teacher dedication
- Some students actually like this format better, and they are producing more, given that they have greater quiet time to work. We are seeing good results in some instances, especially given the circumstances.
- Teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff have shown themselves to be incredibly flexible and caring in helping to manage and provide for our communities during this time.

- Many parents are doing great work to try to work under hard conditions, many at home, while still managing their own working lives.

What is not going so well:

- All are doing their best to navigate uncharted territory. And doing so professionally while also addressing personal needs. We are starting to see sagging shoulders, hear some exhaustion and dismay from educators. How long can we sustain this pace of change is a huge consideration for adults who are being asked to do things they haven't been trained to do.
- Many students can't access materials due to lack of skills/knowledge. Many students still not engaging at all. The list goes on. If we can't educate ALL students, should we be attempting to educate some?
- What I am consistently hearing from the front lines is major concern regarding student learning, or the lack thereof. Our teachers, across the board, are worried for those students not checking in online, and those without internet access. And those who for one reason or another are not engaging.
- Principals and other educators are also concerned about the rapidly growing gap between those students working hard every day, with support from home, and those students not engaging, with a lack of support at home. What will things look like in our schools upon our return?
- We think the learning is rigorous, but it is a different setting and format. Some things are lost in the translation, such as those learning opportunities that require "being there:" for example, chemistry lab; physical education; many of the technical/ vocational classrooms.
- Parents are NOT teachers and quality instruction cannot ALL be done online.
- We have students who are unable to access any type of learning because they live in poverty and because their parents simply cannot support their learning. We cannot get them free internet because they already owe money to past internet service providers. We cannot get them phone cards to add minutes because there is no way to track what they're using the minutes for. They can't just drive to the school parking lot, because they don't have a license or a car. These students are not receiving equitable opportunities.
- Schools without technology tools, systems, and support will struggle and communities and areas of communities with less of these resources will struggle the most.

Thoughts for the future:

- Everyone is doing what they can but there is a lot of fear and uncertainty out there. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff have shown themselves to be incredibly flexible and caring in helping to manage and provide for our communities during this time.
- Education services and how to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education is front and center on principals minds as we know it is with special educators, special education directors, and superintendents. This is the number one concern shared by principals going forward by far in terms of their doubts about how to effectively address IEP, 504, and EST plans but especially IEP's. Both our National organizations, the National Association of Elementary Schools and the National Association of Secondary Schools along with the national Superintendents association the American Association of School Administrators have all advocated for IDEA flexibility at the federal level. What we at VPA ask is that if some flexibility is eventually granted that our own legislature does not put in any limits on that flexibility. Let our Agency of Education and the experts in the field address this issue. You will have advocates lining up as we do at the federal level to restrict the flexibility of IDEA; and while these advocates are well-intentioned, we are in a crisis like never before and we need the maximum flexibility we can get from the federal government if we are going to continue to be able to educate students at any level, we cannot put up any extra barriers for teachers and administrators to do the very best they can at this time.
- Assessment? Accountability? How can we do these in a fair and equitable manner. It seems impossible – are we assessing the student or the resources their family may or may not have? We understand that there will not be standardized testing this year. But for some students, the possibility of lack of daily presence in school is going to make it more difficult to meet grade expectations.
- We are also worried about getting students to graduation. We think that there will be many who will not meet graduation requirements. Some students are simply not engaging. Maybe because of the lack of structure, maybe because of lack of resources. We know that when a student doesn't graduate from high school it puts them at a distinct disadvantage for the rest of their lives
- Additionally, we worry about potential of retention of students who can't or won't do what the school requires from home or long distance learning. We know that a student who is retained is 90% more likely to drop out of school than students that are not retained. We know the research is clear that

retention in the elementary grades should be a course of last option and that it is very seldom effective unless there is a medical reason or very unusual individual circumstances involved and even then it should be done in Kindergarten or first grade typically.

- Even if we do this well and to the best of our ability (hard to assess even that as there is no baseline for this experience), it will never be the same as being in a classroom. By trying it, are we sending the message that it's possible? Should someone say, this isn't a thing we can do? Or at least say loudly that we are doing our best knowing it won't be the equivalent. We can't replicate what we do for our children in a school day full of peers and educators in an online setting.
- If we are indeed out all year....is what we are asking of educators, students and families sustainable? Is it sustainable for only some? If only for some and we move forward, are we perpetuating and deepening the inequities that currently exist in our society?
- It's a challenge for the students in the lower grades, who need direct contact with their teacher, as their ability to learn independently is just not there yet
- Parents are NOT teachers and instruction cannot ALL be done online
- No matter what does or does not occur in this Educational Progression mandate, we have to accept every student back to school at whatever level they are at and families know and TRUST this. At what point do we put families and our staff first and do what we can with what we have but acknowledge that if students could be taught to the same exemplar remotely as under normal circumstances, none of us would have jobs. I have a huge concern about the stress teachers are feeling about being judged when they can't get families to connect any longer

Final Comments

The VPA and our members stand ready to do whatever we can to support the students of Vermont. And when we say students, we mean ALL students. As I've mentioned repeatedly from the words of principals, we cannot expect to provide the outstanding quality of education that Vermont is known for in a remote distance learning construct. We can do our best but we especially have concerns for little children who are learning how to read, special education students and other students who need extra services that are provided at the school house that can't be replicated remotely, and the thousands of students in the state who have no or very poor internet connectivity. To say nothing of the fact that parents are not

licensed educators, and do not have the training necessary to teach at the level we need.

I'm proud of our school leaders and their staff's. They have had to adjust on the fly with announcements coming every day that sometimes are opposite of the previous day. They have done this as best they can through this unprecedented crisis. Thank you for your time. Any questions?