
AOE Testimony on H.209: An act relating to ending the suspension of State aid for school construction projects

Testimony To: House Committee on Ways and Means

Respectfully Submitted by: Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education

Date: June 9, 2020

The Agency of Education is supportive of the need to address school construction issues. The logical best starting point is a needs assessment – this is something we have advocated for the past two years in the General Assembly. Although the education system has been in a reactive mode to the COVID-19 state of emergency for the past several months, school construction issues should emerge as an important ongoing need of the system.

The pre-existing need for work around school facilities improvement is not directly connected to the COVID-19 planning and response. The Agency is concerned about introducing COVID-19 into this bill. While there will be costs associated with reopening schools safely in the fall, the larger school construction-related needs assessment should be comprehensive and more strategic.

I do not see a direct relationship between the school construction needs assessment and remote learning. School infrastructure necessary to support remote learning is largely in place. Infrastructure in students' homes is the area that needs improvement. Vermont needs to address the need for better connectivity outside of schools, but that is not an area that seems to fit within this bill.

The Agency supports a temporary moratorium on bonding to address equity concerns of some districts being positioned economically and politically to pass bonds while other districts are not. We should include an assessment of the impact the pupil weighting report should have on any broad school construction policy development.

Finally, I am concerned about situating the timing of the work of this bill in the context of the COVID response. This fall, school systems and administrators will be focused on establishing and maintaining operations in the COVID context. It is likely that beginning in spring 2021, they would have time and bandwidth to pivot to an analysis of school construction needs.