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## **Testimony to the House Education Committee: H.209 - An Act Relating to Ending the Suspension of State Aid for School Construction Projects, March 14, 2019**

**Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education**  
**Emily Byrne, Chief Financial Officer**

As we move to improve the current public education system in Vermont it is important that we examine the role of school facilities play in the delivery of public education. The intent of H.209, to begin a conversation around school construction and facilities, is much needed. A lack of state support for school construction has, in part, contributed to a decline in the quality of our school facilities. The condition of our school facilities contributes to the overall quality of education that is delivered to Vermont students. The continued decline in these facilities impacts our students' ability to learn. Without a comprehensive needs assessment of the system, it is impossible to understand the full scope of facility challenges faced by Vermont's schools.

### **Comments on H.209**

1. It is important to conduct a statewide assessment of school maintenance and construction needs before an appropriate policy or funding mechanism can be determined.
2. Such a needs assessment would allow us to prioritize our plans to address school health and safety issues. Without a comprehensive understanding of what needs districts have, the State cannot begin to assess the appropriate funding mechanism or the appropriate policy strategy.
3. It is important that new policy initiatives are aligned with on-going work, a bill should include an indication that the prioritization for school construction aid will be based on the consolidation of buildings. This would bring the school construction program in better alignment with other policy initiatives. A focus on school building consolidation would also assist local decision makers in dealing with declining enrollment.
4. In addition to a prioritization based on school consolidation, there should also be a prioritization based on a need for modernization to ensure that viable small schools, particularly those in our more rural areas, can continue to offer high quality learning opportunities for students. This would also help address the equity gap in the relative quality of our school facilities that is becoming increasingly apparent.
5. The original bill included an additional position at the Agency of Education to manage this program. This is important since the AOE currently has no staff in this area. Prior to the suspension of the school construction aid program, the agency had three positions dedicated to administering school construction aid.

6. A survey may not provide the necessary data from school, the survey results will may not provide valuable and reliable information since the data will be highly dependent on the expertise of local officials in the area of school facilities maintenance and construction. Such expertise varies greatly from district to district.
7. If the Committee believes we cannot afford to resurrect the school construction aid program at this time or conduct a needs assessment, than a different approach should be considered and some important questions addressed:
  - iii. What are the goals of a school construction bill? To understand the capital needs of districts, to change the number of facilities that needs to be maintained, or to determine a financing mechanism for an undefined need?
  - iii. Which agency, department or office is the appropriate entity to conduct this work? Does that entity have the capacity to meet the requirements of the legislation?
  - iv. How does this work align with other policy initiative currently underway at the AOE? Does completing this work take priority over other work the agency is engaged in, or is the committee endorsing the possibility that other work will not be completed timely or accurately as a result of redirecting current resources to this work?