

Testimony of Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Good Afternoon.

I am Jeffrey Francis, the Executive Director for the Vermont Superintendents Association, a position I have been privileged to hold for more than two decades. As Executive Director, I work with, and on behalf of, school superintendents, and I strive to convey their voices as they relate to Vermont's public education delivery system.

Superintendents work in, and serve, systems as small as three hundred students and as large as four thousand students. They are responsible for effectively leading those systems on behalf of students, families, staff, communities and taxpayers. All systems, regardless of size and capacity, generally have the same set of duties and responsibilities.

The work, for superintendents and all of those serving in public education, has become exponentially more difficult under conditions brought to us by the pandemic. These conditions include an unstable public health environment, disrupted learning dynamics, worker shortages, the extreme stressors affecting students, educators and families, the sheer burden of managing and serving within complex entities in unusual and extraordinary conditions, and operational and political volatility that is framing, and is being framed, by this unexpected but now sadly routine navigation that we are compelled to respond within.

I want to thank the Committee for devoting this day to the effort to learn more and better understand the extreme implications of our current situation - and to consider what role it might play in softening the effects of these current and future circumstances as we all work to get through this together.

In this testimony I am summarizing the voices of superintendents. The summary is informed by a survey that I conducted of fourteen superintendents who serve as leaders for the Association. They comprise either VSA's ten member board of Trustees or presidents for regional groups within which superintendents work together. As context for the survey, I simply indicated that I would be testifying today and asked what messages they would have me convey to you.

Their responses did not surprise me and I doubt they will surprise you. If anything, I fear that I cannot bring enough emphasis to their words through my own.

As I share their perspectives with you, I want to emphasize this important point. At the center of all of this inescapably and totally appropriately are the children. If the system is under stress, the ability to serve children well is diminished. Decision-makers at all levels must keep that in mind.

Here, in no particular order, is what I heard from superintendents:

- Navigating this pandemic has brought many school systems and the personnel within them to the state of exhaustion. The logistical challenges, emotional burdens and countless issues to understand and attempt to resolve have taken their toll. Morale is at an all-time low on the one hand and the commitment and resilience exhibited by our educators on behalf of children and communities have never been stronger on the other.
- The response to the pandemic from our schools and school officials has not been well-served by the lifting of the state of emergency. While ending the state of emergency was understandable given the apparent course of the pandemic, districts and education had benefited from the clarity of direction and uniformity in place under the state of emergency. That clarity and uniformity is no longer a feature of this navigation, resulting in varied approaches and decisions across the state and subjecting districts to criticisms and in some cases political attacks.
- To you and other members of the General Assembly - do not use the upcoming session to add anything more to the plates of educators and the education system. Superintendents are respectfully but emphatically requesting that the General Assembly add no new laws, programs, requirements or initiatives, regardless of how compelling or how laudable in intent those additions may be considered to be.

In my experience, the 2021 session was as prolific as any in recent memory, and had we known that the pressures of the pandemic would still be here, I believe many among us would have indicated “good idea, perhaps in the future, but not right now.”

Addressing the recommendations of the Weighting Task Force, delineating the roles and responsibilities of the Agency and the State Board and refining the State’s attention to school facilities and environmental initiatives should provide you plenty to work on. Also, the 2022 session would be an appropriate time to survey the current policy and operational landscape and examine how the most prominent and recent laws are serving Vermont’s students and communities.

- Staffing challenges are extreme and despite a public recognition that labor shortages are a norm associated with the pandemic, the manifestation of the shortages for schools is impactful and stark. These challenges are exacerbated by purposeful obligations such as contract tracing and Test to Stay, frequent changes to recommendations issued by the State, and family and other obligations that impact the work-force. Schools have been pushed to an all-hands on deck approach that cannot be sustained.
- According to many educators, student behavioral challenges are at an all-time high. This illuminates the disruptive conditions of the pandemic itself, the staffing shortages that schools are experiencing and the need to bolster mental health supports for children both within schools and the general mental health infrastructure.
- Superintendents expressed concerns about the rollout of the PCB testing initiative and the absence of any substantive commitment by the State to assist school districts programmatically and financially in the event that PCB contamination is found.
- Adhering to the principles and policies in support of equity was heavily emphasized including “embedding equity into all aspects of school life”; “reflecting equity goals in the licensing of educators” and “supporting the values and beliefs of Act 46 with legislation that clarifies the state’s commitment to equity.” I would note that pursuing equity at the local level sometimes plays out differently than it might here in the State House. As you are certainly aware, deliberations and decisions in support of equity, inclusion and racial justice are sometimes contentious and acrimonious at the local level.
- The influences of the implementation of the recommendations of the Weighting Study was on the minds of respondents as was education funding in general. Superintendents commented both on the importance of achieving a change in weights to support equity and concerns that those changes will result in higher taxes and increased pressure on spending in some districts.
- Despite the all-consuming nature of the pandemic, unsurprisingly, Act 173 is front and center on the minds of superintendents - reconciling the census block funding with the FY23 budgeting process, citing the need for improved technical assistance from the Agency of Education and expressing concerns about the unmet need for supplemental adjustments for high cost districts were all-mentioned, as was the intersection between Act 173 funding and the need to get the weights set fairly and appropriately in that context.

- Superintendents emphasized the need to maintain and follow-through on the commitment to support school facilities. This was cited as important both for equity and asset protection.

Finally, while I have endeavored to summarize the responses that I received, I thought that these points would benefit if you saw the words of the superintendents themselves.

Following are representative responses from individual superintendents verbatim:

“With all of this (the pandemic), we still have enrollment decline, a budget cliff looming, PCBs and lead to test for and remediate, and can't get to recovery plan implementation.”

“I would kindly request that no new legislation be pushed out to schools right now that would fundamentally change the way they operate. This is the most difficult period in public education in my 23 years. We need time to implement current legislation such as Act 173 and do not need any new initiatives.”

“We are currently operating in a crisis mode while simultaneously trying to implement practices to help students "recover" and improve our outcomes for students. This is not sustainable. The best thing the legislature can do is keep any new educational initiatives off the table. Working on education finance and weighting is more than sufficient. We need time to follow through and implement the many initiatives that we have before us now.”

“Staffing shortages and Covid fatigue are impacting the quality of education and creating critical incident safety issues related specifically to individual students. If conditions do not improve, shortages will worsen.”

“Intensifying the staffing shortages are the questions hanging over the retirement system changes. This uncertainty is driving veteran educators to leave the field this year and resulting changes will limit new educators from choosing to teach in VT.”

“I can't emphasize enough the unprecedented strain currently being put on public education during this pandemic. We are unable to hire staff, we are under-resourced, and we have a work source who is simply exhausted and has been working as hard as they can for 21 months. We can't ask more of our schools right now, as we are already being asked to do too much.”

“A priority is the weighting study and adjusting the weights to be more equitable, especially as we move from a reimbursement model to a block grant model for SPED funding.”

“Intense mental health and behavior issues are taxing our school systems. For students who require more intensive services, the resources in mental health, in alternative placements, therapeutic stabilization placements, and in patient placements are largely unavailable. Please work to bolster those systems and broaden availability at the state level. When kids are in crisis and waitlists for student placements are a year out, it isn't helpful. This has reached a crisis level in our schools.”

“There is zero capacity to move forward with any type of new proposal or initiative.”

“The state's lack of leadership on facilities support has taken a massive toll. There needs to be state funding of facilities improvements as locals can't raise the funds nor will they invest in buildings when they have to cut staff to do so.”

“Schools are facing the most difficult and discouraging school year I've witnessed in 25+ years in education. The level of anxiety and exhaustion from the pandemic is very real at all levels--support staff, teachers, principals. People don't have the energy to implement complex change and are just trying to get through each day and each week.”

“Technical support for Act 173 is overdue and will swamp the field if not appropriately dealt with by AOE. Poor districts and disenfranchised kids in their systems will particularly suffer.”

“Across the state, schools that specialize in serving students with mental health or behavioral challenges are at capacity and waiting lists are lengthy. As a state, schools and families need access to mental health support for children much earlier in order for them to be successful in school. We are seeing a dramatic rise in the number of students that need a therapeutic environment in order to be able to access their education.”

“Facilities are in ill repair. We need to prioritize the funds to address this.”

Thank you. I would be happy to respond to any questions.