

April 1, 2021

H.426 - An act relating to addressing the needs and conditions of public school facilities in the State

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on H.426. I am speaking on behalf of the Vermont Superintendents Association, the Vermont School Boards Association and the Vermont Principals' Association.

Our Associations support H.426 as it was approved by the House with one significant recommendation.

The need for the bill reflects the reality that there has been a moratorium on school construction aid since 2007.

The bill also recognizes the need to move toward the restoration of school construction aid and provide improved stewardship for school facilities statewide. The bill supports both of those efforts by creating a better understanding of what we are facing related to school infrastructure needs.

The simple recognition that Vermont is contending with an aging school infrastructure would alone affirm the importance of passing H.426 in its current or similar form.

When you consider our growing awareness of the critical need for dealing with environmental and energy conservation interests, as well as the importance of updating school environments to meet the needs of modern-day learners, the bill becomes even more compelling.

Also, given the reality of constrained monetary resources and the demographic changes the state is experiencing, the ability to inform future policy decisions through information that will result from activities supported by the bill is useful and important.

With respect to the specific provisions of the bill, we are providing the following comments:

Section One of the bill sets forth findings that are useful in contextualizing the need for the bill.

Section Two requires updates to the school construction facilities standards and the school capital outlay formula. Both measures will be necessary and useful in an orderly progression to both restoring aid for school construction and making determinations about how to fund and prioritize school facilities projects in the future.

I listened to testimony by State Board Chair John Carroll regarding the reluctance on the part of the State Board to take responsibility for revisions to the capital outlay formula. We can support an amendment to the bill to assign the capital outlay formula update to the Agency of Education.

Section Three directs the Agency of Education, working in coordination with the Commissioner of Buildings and General Services to commission an assessment of all school buildings statewide. This is a very useful and necessary provision because it will establish baseline data that will inform a general understanding of facilities conditions statewide and will cover a useful array of categories. The assessment is comprehensive and covers building age, condition, learning environment and systems integrity and will support prioritization for future investment in building upgrades and strategic investment. The data resulting from the assessment will be maintained at the Agency of Education and will establish a baseline record that will support work and decision making into the future.

Section Four charges the Secretary of Education with reporting to the General Assembly with a recommendation for establishing a funding source that responds to the inventory, needs and conditions of schools statewide. This is an essential feature of the bill.

Sections Five and Six promote the useful concept of shared stewardship by requiring that every school district have a position specifically designated with responsibility for facilities and that the designee receive appropriate training and certification. In addition, school districts are required to establish and maintain a five year capital improvement plan.

Section Seven grants the Agency of Education one limited service position supported by ESSER funds through January 2023 in support of the work outlined above. In earlier drafts of the bill, it was two positions funded permanently. Our belief is that the positions should be permanent. In the past the Agency had staff specifically dedicated to school facilities work and if current infrastructure and future investments are to be sufficiently protected, the State should invest in the human resources necessary to accomplish that.

In summary, we believe that H.426 should be approved by this Committee and the General Assembly and enacted into law.