

April 21, 2021

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

**H.426 - An Act Relating to the Needs and Conditions of Public School Facilities
Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association**

Good Afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I am speaking today on behalf of the Vermont Superintendents Association as well as for members of a task force formed in the fall of 2018 to work on school-related facilities issues.

The task force was made up of school administrators including superintendents and representatives of the Vermont School Custodians and Maintenance Association as well as individuals from the industries that support school facilities work.

Representatives of the task force engaged with the General Assembly at the start of the 2020 session in order to work on legislation that would provide a comprehensive program of facilities support including both funding for school construction aid and facilities stewardship. The work began with the House Education and Institutions Committee but was interrupted by the onset of the pandemic.

The House Education Committee prioritized school facilities work at the start of the 2021 session with the House ultimately approving H.426. We believe that H.426 is a very good bill because it sets forth provisions that respond comprehensively to pressing needs that affect the school facilities arena.

H.426 as it passed the House would:

- Update the School Construction Standards and Capital Outlay Formula
- Commission a school facilities conditions assessment that will provide a wide range of information in order to inform future remediation, investment and policy decisions
- Require a school construction funding study
- Create a stewardship program for school facilities by requiring that school districts assign responsibility for facilities management to specific personnel, set up training and certification for that personnel and create capital improvement plans
- Provide staff capacity at the Agency of Education in support of all of the work

It is a straightforward bill that is comprehensive in nature and holds great promise for significantly improving state and local stewardship of a valuable and essential resource.

Now, once more, we are faced with the possibility that the pandemic will impede (if not bring to an end) progress on this important issue.

Secretary French's proposal to narrow the focus of H.426 exclusively to COVID response may be timely and expedient, but we don't want to set aside the longer range and necessary vision reflected in the House-passed version of the bill, at the cost of losing progress against longer term, and long-standing, needs.

We are hoping for a Senate proposal of amendment that satisfies Secretary French's priorities without forgoing ours. In order to achieve both goals, we recommend combining elements of the House-passed version with Secretary French's proposal.

To accomplish that, we would support an approach that provides for the immediate building inventory proposed by Secretary French **and** conducting the more complete school facilities needs assessment at a later date. If the school facilities needs assessment is not eligible for ESSER funding, we would support appropriating education fund dollars for that purpose. We will also support extending the timelines on the other provisions of the bill in order to enable the Agency to focus on prioritized work related to the COVID response. But, these commitments need to be reflected in the bill that is enacted.

Our greatest concern is that we not lose momentum toward the work that is reflected in the House-passed version of H.426. Because if that work is lost, who knows when it will be recovered.

Thank you.