



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Erin Maguire, Director of Equity & Inclusion, Essex Westford School District

Re: Senate Bill 16 Testimony on behalf of VCSEA

Date: January 27, 2021

The **Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA)** has been active in educational leadership across Vermont for over 35 years. The organization has supported Special Education Administrators and other special education leaders and worked closely and collaboratively with Superintendents, Principals, the Agency of Education, family support organizations, and many other state organizations throughout the years. We stay abreast of legislative issues at both the state and federal levels. Our collaboration with our national organization, CASE (Council of Administrators of Special Educators, a subdivision of the Council for Exceptional Children), continues to broaden our perspective and inform us on the national level. Our goal is to provide leadership, support, collegiality, and mentoring to all those who teach and lead in education and special education in Vermont. We are honored to be a part of a state that invests in all of our children for the future of our state.

VCSEA holds a strong position related to equity with specific attention to the intersectionality of race and disability. VCSEA supports a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion across all of our Vermont schools, especially in light of the inequities further highlighted by the COVID pandemic. This means taking action to ensure opportunity and representation for all identities and addressing systemic racism within the education system in Vermont and beyond. Policymakers and education leaders across the state require training and a deep understanding of the role schools play in developing curriculum and having policies that represent all students, including students who have disabilities as well as Black, Indigenous, and students of color. Our students represent many intersections of identities that have been historically marginalized, and all students have a right to see themselves as well as learn about others in their community school experiences. Curriculum reviews, diversification of the educator workforce, and antiracist policy analysis at the state and school board levels are essential actions that must be taken statewide to ensure outcomes aligned with this critical body of work.

- Curricular representation means that all students see themselves in the curricular materials and lenses used to instruct both current and historical events.
- Workforce diversification to ensure that all students see themselves in the teachers and leaders in their schools is a needed focus in Vermont schools. VCSEA encourages centering a variety of identities and asks for an emphasis on the representation of people with disabilities.
- Policymakers across Vermont should receive training in and hold an expectation for ensuring equity centered policy development and procedural implementation. Centering the voices of those who have historically been marginalized is a necessary step in addressing equity-driven policy development.

It is within this context that the **VCSEA supports centering attention on data through the lens of equity**. Discipline data is one point of importance in this regard and VCSEA appreciates the effort to consider data to support the work of Vermont schools on any exclusionary practices. VCSEA does not believe that any child

should go without an education based on behavioral events. Behaviors are communication and while some behaviors can be very challenging to work through and improve through quality learning approaches, we know that all students are valuable, should have a sense of belonging, and must have access to education. Zero-tolerance policies are exclusionary by nature and we should reconsider such policies through an equity lens across our state, including in the area of education. While data is a beginning to consider the next steps for our state, we look forward to being part of the collaborative approach to ensure all students are successful, even when behaviors appear as severe and unexpected barriers to progress.

Students with disabilities are of particular importance in this data review. It is highly recommended that the committee add a Director of Special Education, an Educational Equity Leader, as well as a Curriculum Director to this committee. We are also grateful to see teachers as part of this committee and suggest maintaining one Special Educator and adding the Director of Special Education.

In addition, VCSEA recognizes that **discipline data is but one data point** that should be considered within the context of equity of outcomes for schools across the state. In an effort to ensure we are considering data in the context of the whole as opposed a single piece being the center of an answer to a much larger issue of equity, we suggest policymakers consider how this committee report will connect to and play a larger role in the expectation of a comprehensive approach to data analysis that centers equity.

It is with all of this in mind that VCSEA offers the following suggestions:

- 1. Add a Director of Special Education to the committee**
- 2. Add a Director of Curriculum to the committee**
- 3. Add a Director of Equity to the committee**
- 4. Develop a component of this bill that connects it to other equity initiatives being expected at the state level within education for purposes of cohesion.**
- 5. Consider the recommendation that requires the committee to consider other data points that will help to represent the intersectionality of identities instead of seeing identities as binary.**
- 6. Provide space for the idea that students require different approaches at different times and providing time and space for resetting and regulation is not always disciplinary in nature. The definition of planned opportunities for regulation and how that differs from a suspension is an important concept to embed within this discussion.**
- 7. Consider a measure of safety for students as it relates to a momentary removal to allow for planning and reintegration is also of importance as this discussion occurs.**

Setting high expectations around collecting and analyzing data through an equity lens is a critical statewide approach. Thank you for your efforts toward addressing this issue. While you do so, please consider the learning needed within the context of schools that are managing an incredibly challenging crisis of educating students in our communities during a pandemic as you continue your work this session.