



TO: Senate Education Committee

FROM: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director, Vermont School Boards Association

RE: S.249 (mandatory school attendance age)

DATE: January 28, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the importance of high school attendance and completion. My hope is to highlight some of the many facets that need to be considered within the context of a bill that would increase the mandatory age for school attendance.

As I developed this testimony, I found myself wondering:

- 1) What do we know about the students who are over the age of 16 and are not completing school?
- 2) Do we have disaggregated data on the students for whom this proposed change would affect (specific age, gender identity, race, ethnicity, disability, mobility, homelessness, English Learner status, free/reduced lunch status)?
- 3) How many students graduate before the age of 18 and would the proposed bill compel those students to attend because it is based on age?
- 4) What about students who demonstrate proficiency-based graduation requirements before the age of 18?
- 5) Is the goal of the proposed legislation aimed to keep students in school until a set age or until they accomplish a certain level of proficiency?
- 6) Has there been an efficacy analysis of the systems in place to support students who are at risk of not completing high school?
  - a) Does participation in flexible pathways affect retention of students?
  - b) Does participation in CTE programs affect retention of students?
  - c) Does participation in extracurricular activities affect retention of students?
- 7) Have we asked students themselves about what they need to stay in school?

Retaining students in school through graduation requires many tools, strategies, and resources as well as equitable access to meaningful and rigorous learning experiences that will allow students to demonstrate proficiency in multiple ways. When students fail to attend

school, school districts are required to set truancy procedures in motion. 16 V.S.A. § 1125 requires that, annually, the school board appoints one or more individuals to serve as the truant officer and ensures that appointment is recorded with the clerk of the school district.

School attendance (truancy) situations are often complex, require an investment in community resources in order to support students and families, and require school administrators, staff, and truancy officers to have thorough understanding of the applicable laws.

Section 5 of the bill would amend this law to require systemic changes to the process of truancy implementation every year for four years. This would likely result in confusion on the part of students and families as well as an already overstretched education system and the local law enforcement resources that schools rely on.

*→ It is recommended that any change to the mandatory age of school attendance is a one-time change in order for every individual affected by this change to become knowledgeable in and adapt to new requirements.*

In conclusion, it is the position of VSBA to support student attendance through the completion of a high school diploma and through a variety of creative and flexible initiatives. Additional information is needed to better understand the unique needs of the group of students this legislation is intended to affect. To achieve the goal of increasing high school graduation rates and school retention, it is likely that schools need more flexibility to develop innovative strategies that are not addressed in the current version of this bill. Lastly, if these changes are to move forward, VSBA recommends a one-time change to the required age of school attendance.