



Senate Education Testimony COVID Response in Schools

1/12/22

From: Jay Nichols, Executive Director, Vermont Principals' Association

I spoke to Senator Campion on Saturday and he asked me to talk to school leaders about their thoughts regarding new guidance as reported by Seven Days and others on changes to how contact tracing would be managed in schools. He also asked what the legislature could do to help including potentially closing schools for a week or something like that to reset given the major negative impact COVID is having on school attendance both for students and staff.

I spoke to our 15 member Executive Council which is the governing body of VPA and consists of a retired principal, an assistant principal, a technical center director, and 12 active elementary, middle and secondary school principals. Here is the summary of their thoughts to date:

1. In terms of the change from school to parental testing the summary was basically a wait and see approach. We need to see how this plays out. Leaders appreciate that this will likely support operational functionality in school buildings and allow school nurses, school principals, and other school officials to no longer have to spend so much time as de facto public health officials. We understand that what schools were currently being asked to do was not sustainable. And we appreciate Sec. French signaling to us last Friday that these changes were going to take place.
2. In terms of a reboot or restart, we feel that this should be done at the local level only as a last resort when schools cannot safely staff their schools. Students need to be in school in person to the degree possible. This is especially critical for our most vulnerable children. However, school superintendents, in consultation with school principals, should be able to pivot to remote learning for short periods of time when they cannot staff their schools. And those days should count as school days. Extending the required school year is a non-starter as principals point out that morale is low and teachers and other staff are absolutely physically and emotionally exhausted.
3. Test shortages are a big concern. For this new way of testing students to work, schools will need all the tests necessary to ensure students, families, and staff that they have the

tests as soon as they need them. This needs to include, as necessary, vaccinated students and staff as well as the unvaccinated.

4. I agree with Jeff Fannon and VT-NEA that schools also need to have access to high quality masks for students and staff.