

Response to request from Chair Campion from Vermont Principals' Association

Senate Education Testimony 1/4/22

Information based on discussions with over 100 school leaders since the start of the school year. This is written as an update from what I shared with House Education leaders in a meeting on October 27, 2021.

How are the children, staff, families?

1. Children on average based on principal comments are struggling. Lots of issues around self-regulation. Principals commented that students are much less mature than usual and that students are really struggling leading to LOTS of behavioral issues. This is at all levels but particularly disturbing in the younger grades. We need to remember that the level of trauma students have experienced due to the pandemic is like something we have not seen in our lifetimes.

We need partnership to meet the mental health and social emotional needs of our students. We need to eliminate silos; the kids have to come to school. We welcome all children and are required to provide education to all children, but we need help to provide them the services they so desperately need.

- a. A coalition of the nation's leading experts in pediatric health has issued an urgent warning declaring the mental health crisis among children so dire that it has become a national emergency. The declaration was penned by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children's Hospital Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, which together represent more than 77,000 physicians and 200 children's hospitals
- b. Three medical groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, recently declared [a national state of emergency in children's mental health](#). They cited "dramatic increases in emergency department visits for all mental health emergencies."

- c. **Suicide attempts have risen**, slightly among adolescent boys and sharply among adolescent girls. The number of E.R. visits for suspected suicide attempts by 12- to 17-year-old girls rose by 51 percent from early 2019 to early 2021, [according to the C.D.C.](#)

2. Principals are facing unprecedented challenges, they are on 24/7; and they report that staff are exhausted and overwhelmed to a great degree. Principals are at a breaking point also. I've talked to over 100 school leaders since the start of the year and virtually everyone says this is the hardest year or one of the most difficult years they have experienced. ... and we are only in January. This is not sustainable. Principals are feeling out on their own without sufficient support from the Agency of Education, Department of Children and Families and Department of Health. Nurses and principals have been doing Department of Health work. Is this going to become the new normal is a big fear?

3. Families of course are all over the place as you might expect. We have had our issues with anti masking and anti vaccine parents. This has been an issue at some school board meetings as you know. We have heard frustration from parents re. Contact tracing and students being sent home who have no symptoms and appear to be perfectly healthy. The lack of a real statewide response as to how each school is handling these issues also causes some parental angst.

What is working and what is not?

1. Contact tracing is not and has not worked well. School leaders along with school nurses are spending many hours including on weekends navigating this issue, contacting parents etc. This is not why they went to graduate school to become educational leaders. Instructional leadership, support including supervision and evaluation of teachers and focus on academic learning is not a priority and really can't be in many places as school leaders are in a constant state of triage.
2. Major staffing shortage issues, few or no substitutes. Not just teachers, support staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, custodians are at a level worse than ever before in anyone's memory. I have principals constantly substitute teaching for a variety of positions and are unable to really do their "regular" job. Irasburg school just told me they were closing the next three days

because they have 9 teachers and both subs they use out for COVID reasons.

3. Transportation issues have stopped some extracurricular activities from occurring and in a couple of cases have caused schools to close because they didn't have bus drivers to transport students.
4. Most principals are not able to serve as instructional leaders this year - all or the vast majority of their time is spent on management functions and getting things "covered." It is moving from one crisis to another. And, again, principals share that staff morale and pressure and stress are all at the breaking point. The system is very fragile.
5. What is working is that in many schools the adults are bonding together in survival mode to support one another and children at unprecedented levels. Unfortunately, that is not occurring in every school.
6. The work schools are doing in the area of SEL and have done in the past is really making a difference for many children and staff. We are feeding kids and supporting them the best we can with a dearth of resources etc. Schools have been incredibly active in finding ways to make sure students are experiencing positive connections and a sense of belonging at schools.
7. We are not in recovery mode -schools are still in survival mode and people don't feel valued. This is the time to step up and completely support public education. This means making sure education fund dollars are being used in an effective way. We need to support our public schools and make sure education funds are not siphoned away by any groups or schools that discriminate against some of our children.
8. Many more after school programs have been implemented throughout the state making a difference for all students. Hopefully we can keep momentum in this area.

What are your requests for legislative action (or non-action!) in 2022

1. Support VPA retirement bill concept that would allow educators to come out of retirement for a year to staff hard to fill positions at a school without them

having to “leave” retirement. This is an easy win/win proposition.

2. Support any federal or other efforts that would allow for schools to have four year olds in school full day for early kindergarten with a corresponding FTE for Ed. Funding purposes.
3. Look at or support legislation that would provide financial assistance to educators that work in more economically depressed schools if they agree to stay in those positions for a set period of time. This could take the form of support in paying off student loans or extra enumeration.
4. Make sure the state pays for any mitigating measures related to PCB testing - that this doesn't become a budget killer for local school districts.
5. Make sure that any work on Act 173 implementation stays true to the major goals of that legislation: more flexibility for schools to better support all students, major reduction in paperwork in other adminstravia that has nothing to do with serving kids, and developing a comprehensive student support system in schools that ultimately will better serve students while slowing down the rising costs of special education services.
6. Don't add ANY legislation that puts more pressure and stress on School Boards, Superintendents, Principals, Teachers, and Support Staff. To the degree possible in relationship to schools this is the perfect year to be the “Do Nothing New Congress.” The list of requirements is constantly growing without the corresponding support. Don't add anything unless you are going to take other things off the plate of educators.
7. And please don't pass any laws that will further increase the divide between the haves and the have nots. We need to make sure our poorest least resourced school districts have access to highly qualified educators, not just the districts with the most resources.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of Vermont School Leaders, Jay Nichols

