

**Vermont State Senate
Vermont Senate Education Committee**

Testimony for the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA)

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the important questions of how our schools are contending with COVID and what measures the General Assembly can take, or not take, to better support school communities, including students and families, during this challenging time.

With respect to how schools are doing, we will not mince words. The challenges brought to us by this pandemic are, needless to say, formidable and should not be understated.

For superintendents, our experience and our perspective brings us to these observations around the effect of the pandemic and its navigation on schools:

- Anxiety levels are very high among staff and members of the community
 - Inconsistent and ill-timed communications from the Centers for Disease Control, Governor Scott, the Vermont Department of Health and the Agency of Education, without sufficient advance warning and detail to superintendents, has been problematic on a number of levels.

Examples of decisions or an absence of decisions that have been problematic include the decision not to impose a statewide mask mandate, covid test kits being distributed without advance notice to school officials, the Vermont Department of Health making, changing and announcing guidance in a manner or at a time such as a holiday break or just before that may make it difficult to communicate and difficult to comprehend. Circumstances may dictate that decisions can only be made in this manner, but these decisions and the way they are made and communicated bring stress and acrimony to school communities, including families, staff, and students.

- Educator anxiety is also impacted by sudden switches in protocols as they stand in front of 20 kids who don't keep on their masks all day and then are asked to go into the classroom of colleagues who are out quarantining for their own illnesses or that of their families.

- Staffing capacity is a major concern. It is important to acknowledge that schools are not like restaurants or retail operations which may shorten or otherwise adjust shifts if staff are not available. As a hugely important public service and necessity, schools must operate on a regular schedule, if at all possible. Families and their students depend on us, as do other facets of our society's economy.
 - Yet we cannot get substitute teachers and in many cases even cannot fill existing openings. This is happening in schools across the state. Then to quarantine for COVID either due to their own illness or the need for the employee's children to be home with their own illnesses and school closures means that we often have teachers filling in for each other, further exacerbating their own exhaustion, undermining our ability to teach well, and at times making for unsafe classroom situations
- Despite best efforts, some school closures do become necessary due to COVID-related illness or the now chronic lack of substitute personnel.
 - The afore-mentioned challenges are exacerbated by the justifiable but problematic messaging that it is imperative to keep schools open without taking all necessary steps to curb community transmission to the greatest extent possible.
- Student behavior, particularly in kindergarten, 8th grade, and 9/10 grade is considerably less stable than in typical years; schools do not have the capacity to deal with increasing mental health and other behavioral needs. Schools are attempting to improvise and establish expanded programs - in real time - without sufficient internal staff and with limited or no mental health staff capacity available in the community.
- Schools are treading water through rough waves and progress on traditional education priorities, including those enacted by this General Assembly, is disrupted or even put on hold. There is no growth possible on any initiatives, strategic plans, or staff professional development for initiatives such as Act 173, literacy, etc that can take place right now; administrators spend their days covering, testing, or figuring out coverage and dealing with student behavior. There is no room for anything else as staff are exhausted and there simply isn't the brain space for adult learning.
 - Academic progress and opportunities have suffered, as daily operations and efforts focus on operational survival and, this school year, the absences of students and staff have become significant as well. Schools will eventually be held accountable or called to task for that academic decline without a full understanding of what it means to try to teach or learn in a constantly disrupted environment or lack of staff resources.

We wish that the picture illustrated by the information and examples that we have discussed to this point was not the case, but unfortunately and regrettably, it is. With respect to the question, How can the General Assembly be helpful, we will be similarly frank.

- First and foremost, we want to repeat our appeal for no new legislatively derived initiatives for public education during this session and until we emerge from the logistical, operations and learning-related dynamics that are currently impeding us. Schools are focused on getting through this pandemic in the short-term and on learning recovery in the long-term. Schools can get the job done, but not if more priorities are added and more programs added on.
- Similarly, be realistic about what is facing the education system in Vermont presently. The first half of the biennium was one of the more prolific for public education in recent memory and large policy issues loom - the implementation of Weighting Factors Report; Act 72 - an omnibus law on capital infrastructure; PCB testing and remediation; and efforts to implement Act 173; thematically and practically, we are working to improve access and equity for all students, across the board.
- We are asking that legislation be expeditiously enacted that will allow retired educators to augment the education workforce. This will require removing provisions of law that limit their capacity to do so. This relief can be temporary but should at least cover this year and next, with an evaluation of the necessity to extend this provision further into the future, since workforce supply challenges are likely to be ongoing for the foreseeable future.
- We are asking that the General Assembly quickly determine the procedures for whether annual meetings can be conducted remotely this year, as school districts warn ballots that week and the language matters.
- Allow board meetings to take place virtually as the pandemic is still surging. Encourage this, rather than hybrid meetings, as the best virtual option.
- Establish incentives to entice new and more teachers to Vermont—particularly in the field of special education
 - This hiring season could be disastrous with districts that pay more filling vacancies within their teaching staff while the districts who pay less face worker shortages.
 - The pension fund discussions loom large and are playing into new teacher decisions on whether or not to teach in VT, as well as influencing teachers who are within retirement eligibility to leave the workforce.
- Focus attention on systematically increasing mental health supports for children - both within and outside the public education system.

Finally and significantly, with respect to navigating the pandemic, please understand that it is not an area where local decision making is generally helpful to school districts and by extension all children. To the contrary, please emphasize and support statewide approaches so that the more and less fortunate, those vaccinated and unvaccinated and believers and deniers are not the prevailing story for public education and the communities that it serves.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. We are happy to respond to your questions.