

Vermont Senate Education Committee
Tuesday, January 12, 2021

Testimony of David Younce, President, Vermont Superintendents Association
Superintendent for the Mill River Unified Union School District

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon on the question, how are things going relative to contending with COVID-19 pandemic - from the perspective of the superintendent.

- Superintendents are generally complimentary and appreciative of the overall response by the Scott Administration. We understand that there are things that we will never understand about the details and challenges inherent in State Administrative decision-making. We appreciate the work of Governor Scott and his team in leading Vermont through the pandemic.
- Some of our early challenges included the following: lack of knowledge of the virus; organization and communications challenges; and, responding to concerns of the school community and the community at large - with the weeks of March 2nd and 9th showing a major escalation in intensity.
- VSA as an organization exerted its influence in March to inform the ultimate decision to close schools largely because of escalating concerns and operational pressures from school communities and the community at large
- In the first month of school closures, school districts reacted quickly and efficiently to feed students, prop up what we now know to be less than ideal remote learning systems, shift to remote work environments overnight, and manage the social emotional, technology, employment and nutritional needs in ways that schools had never before seen at a scale that schools have never before faced.
- In the early months of the pandemic, districts were required to develop continuity of learning plans which would account for how schools would manage and navigate the needs, both known and unknown, that lie ahead. That process began with fits and starts as draft models required significant revision, which VSA played a key role in, so that required reporting and planning efforts would align with the work that was actually being done on the ground in school districts.
- Districts have found federal dollars that have supported COVID relief efforts to be invaluable. The mechanics and timing of approval have been challenging at times, but we are aware that the Agency of Education has worked diligently to identify and distribute the federal funds to schools to meet directly-connected COVID needs in areas related to staffing, materials and technology, PPE, along with many other qualified expenses. Without this support, the fiscal crisis we face would be exponentially exacerbated. We are grateful for the AOE's work in this regard.

- One of the significant challenges facing school districts in the pandemic has to do with the myriad human resources challenges that emerge as a result of the pandemic. Decisions around disability determinations, virus vulnerability, remote work options, equity and equality, and quarantine dynamics generate daily decision points that must be navigated with clarity and consistency in order to not place districts in legal jeopardy. Many or most Vermont districts and SUs do not have separate human resources departments to navigate these types of decisions. What this means is that the same individuals who are tasked with communicating to staff that they care about all employees and want to support people through the difficulties of the pandemic are at times faced with informing individuals that their requests or needs are unable to be met. This is a dynamic that existed at a very small scale prior to the pandemic. It is unfortunately rampant now. VSA, in collaboration with VSBA, pursued clear, jointly-generated legal guidance from multiple educational attorneys throughout the state to ensure that superintendents had good information at hand in order to make the best, legal, consistent decisions possible. This is a role that we were compelled to play - in an ideal world, that guidance would have come from state resources.
- Superintendents and Boards have been granted latitude to make operational decisions in local districts, which is appropriate and greatly appreciated. Challenges do emerge in all districts when aspirations expressed by state officials and the reality of conditions and logistics locally are in conflict. As a result, local decision-making often translates to local backlash that falls at the feet of the local decision-makers. While this is all a part of the work, it contributes greatly to the collective exhaustion of superintendents and other decision-makers. The pandemic in very simple terms has been a leadership experience that involves responding to aspirational statements from above, navigating local dynamics and statewide ground rules around those decisions, and preparing for the fallout. This is made more challenging by the proliferation of social media.
- It has been accurately portrayed that virus cases are not spreading in schools in the same way that they are in the broader community. This is largely due to the fidelity with which school district employees have adhered to the Health and Safety guidelines required - not only at school, but in their personal lives. School district employees deserve great credit for that fidelity. However, outbreaks and cases do occur in schools and children and adults do get sick. Responding to those cases and outbreaks - case by case - school to school - and classroom by classroom - is an all-encompassing experience for local schools and districts. Some districts have seen more cases than others. Most all have been affected.
- Schools are not specifically engaged in “contact tracing”, which we interpret as meaning the process of identifying and contacting close contacts in the broader

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community. But, it is important that the Committee understand that schools are involved in identifying, tracking and communicating with all parties linked to a case that is connected to a school. While this approach has proven to be a faster approach than the Department of Health is able to deliver on, which makes sense from a procedural standpoint, it is also worth noting that the involved staff members who engage in that work become completely immersed in that work until all contacts have been made, requiring significant other areas of operational focus to be set aside for the immediate quarantine-related concerns.

- We have experienced significant challenges with messaging and decisions made by State Government and how those messages play out at the local level. For example:
 - The public push in the fall for all students to access in-person school, when the required health guidelines prevented that from occurring in many places due to social distancing requirements
 - The public proclamations that athletics should occur, particularly in the winter season, when school leaders and prominent physicians statewide indicated extreme concerns about such an action
 - The timing of decisions around holiday breaks related to “multi-household gatherings” and school districts’ role in executing and communicating about those decisions
 - The admittedly aspirational desire to have all students return to school in person following April break, without the necessary context provided for families and teachers indicating that virus conditions and social distancing requirements are the ultimate variables in that type of decision
- Employee virus testing in schools is going reasonably well and the infrastructure established by State Government is in place to sustain that effort over the long term. School district employees appreciate the simplicity of the process and the turnaround in terms of results.
- Vaccinations are becoming more and more of an area of focus for school district employees. Who gets vaccinated, when, and the variability that exists regionally, raise a great number of questions about who is responsible for communication on those topics and how. In many ways, the vaccine question links back to the question of keeping schools open to in-person learning. The cognitive dissonance on this topic experienced by school district employees is having a significant effect on our workforce. They are struggling with understanding why, if schools are critical to remain open to best serve students and society, school employees are not considered worthy of early vaccine administration. They realize that others are essential as well, but have not seen others mandated to return to in person work in the interest of opening the economy. If there is a possibility that schools can indeed return to full in-person instruction after April

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Break, ensuring that all school district employees have had access to a vaccine as soon as possible seems to be an important milestone.

- Finally, there are of course numerous COVID-related educational needs:
 - As it relates to learning loss/recovery, we are seeing that the educational, nutrition, and social-emotional needs that we face are what they always have been. The pandemic has in many ways illuminated and magnified the cracks and discrepancies that have existed.
 - We know that remote learning, especially the quickly-developed version developed across the world in the springtime, pales when compared to in-person opportunities. But, high quality remote learning systems, which many districts have developed, are a reasonable substitute when there is no other choice.
 - The pandemic lessons learned about instructional delivery will have positive impacts on our systems as we continue to seek to meet our statewide objectives, particularly the goals of Act 77.
 - The social and emotional needs of our students and employees are being monitored and attended to as best as we are able. We know that there will be recovery necessary when the pandemic has concluded. Districts are largely focused on navigating this school year as best as we are able, and planning for a fall that hopefully feels more normal and has supports in place previously required under statute and state rule to serve our students as well as possible.
 - Ultimately, it is our hope and wish that the General Assembly does more than just understand the impressive work that school districts have collaboratively accomplished with the support of boards, staff and communities. It is our hope that the General Assembly recognizes that the best expression of support for school districts at this time does not take the form of new ideas and initiatives. It takes the form of time and space. Time and space to lead through the remainder of the pandemic. Time and space to complete implementation of significant legislation already in place. Time and space to take care of kids, staff and communities. And finally, time and space to finish a good work started. Vermont is full of good people who seek to do the right things for the right reasons, and our schools are but a microcosm of that cultural reality. I wish to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to deliver on our promises to meet and exceed your expectations and contribute ably to Vermont, its recovery, and its future success.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me, or to VSA Executive Director Jeff Francis at any time.

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