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To: Senate Education Committee
From: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director
Re: Introduction to the VSBA/COVID Related Needs
Date: January 14, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with your committee about the Vermont School Boards Association, the role of school boards in Vermont's public education system, and COVID-19 related needs of school districts.

ABOUT THE VSBA

Incorporated in 1961, the VSBA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The articles of incorporation filed with the Secretary of State's office in 1961 indicate that the organization was established for the following purposes:

- To promote and stimulate interest in education
- To cooperate with other organized educational groups
- To assist school directors in promoting better educational opportunities for the children of Vermont

The vision and mission of the organization have evolved over time, and are currently enshrined in the organization's bylaws:

Vision: The Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) envisions a state where every student has access to and is engaged in a world-class education, where local boards provide student-focused oversight of education systems, and where educators, families and communities are engaged partners, ensuring that the futures of all Vermont children are driven by their aspirations, not bound by their circumstances.

Mission: The VSBA works to achieve our vision for public education by supporting local and supervisory union boards to be effective trustees for their communities, and by providing a strong collective voice toward enhancing the cause of public education in Vermont.

The VSBA is a membership organization. Our mission is to support school board members in the performance of their role and to serve as their

collective voice in the public policy environment. That said, not all school board members see every issue the same way. We have clear processes for taking positions, but it is possible you will hear from school board members who have a different perspective. We welcome all school board members to share their views with the VSBA and with policymakers.

The VSBA has a 24 member board of directors: a president, immediate past president and 22 regional representatives – 2 representatives elected from each of 11 regions. The President is elected from among active board members at the August meeting of each year, to serve a term from November 1 to October 31 of the following year. Neil Odell of Norwich is the current President of the Association.

The VSBA is governed by bylaws, resolutions and policies. Resolutions are "positions taken by the Association on issues of importance to Vermont school boards. They may include recommendations for action by the VSBA, local school boards, the Legislature, the Executive Branch...or other decision-making bodies." Resolutions are guidance for staff and the VSBA board when they are working in the public policy arena or developing programs and services for our members. They are approved at the annual business meeting of the Association each October.

In the absence of a resolution on a particular topic, the VSBA board provides guidance to VSBA staff. The VSBA has four full-time staff whose role is to provide the following five services:

Advocacy

The VSBA provides representation in the general assembly and in public policy development with the agency of education, the state board, and with various education organizations.

Board Training & Support

The VSBA provides many training opportunities for board members, including School Board U Live, a comprehensive workshop on the Essential Work of Vermont School Boards; School Board U Digital, a series of monthly Webinars on relevant topics of interest; on-site workshops; extensive website resources (www.vtvsba.org); and customized board development including board retreats. VSBA's annual conference and regional meetings serve to

share best practices and foster a sense of community among dedicated board members.

Consulting Services

The VSBA supports member boards with operational or management challenges and strategic planning needs. Specialized consultation services are available to help with superintendent searches and evaluations, strategic planning, governance transitions, and Policy Governance.

Communications

The VSBA provides all members with regular information updates through the VSBA website, VSBA Update emails, a quarterly *From the Boardroom* newsletter, and regular legislative reports. The VSBA also publishes the *Vermont Education Law Book* and *Essential Work of Vermont School Boards* which is a model for effective education governance.

Legal and Policy Services

The VSBA provides consultation regarding legal questions, updates on changes to laws and regulations, legal training for boards and superintendents, and general collective bargaining supports. In conjunction with Vermont School Boards Insurance Trust (VSBIT), the VSBA also publishes model school board policies and conducts policy audits through our Vermont Education Policy Service.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

School boards are not involved in the day-to-day operations of schools. Their job is to provide high level, student-focused oversight and assure the delivery of an effective education program in their communities at a reasonable cost for taxpayers in accordance with state and federal law.

School boards have six areas of responsibility at the local level:

- Engage the community to establish a vision for the school district
- Adopt policies
- Hire a superintendent and establish clear expectations
- Develop a budget and provide financial oversight
- Monitor progress towards the vision
- Operate in an ethical and effective manner

To serve on a school board is to uphold the great American tradition of a free, public education for all. This tradition forms the foundation of our democracy: a well-informed citizenry. It is extremely important that students develop critical and independent thinking skills and that they understand how history can impact the future. Simply put, education is crucial and central to the future of our state and school boards play an important role in Vermont's education system.

SCHOOL DISTRICT ANNUAL MEETINGS AND BUDGET

I will now move on to COVID-19 related needs of Vermont school districts. First, please note that the needs are many and the Committee has heard about several needs through other witnesses. I am highlighting school district annual meetings and budgets because the Senate will be considering a bill to address the issue this week.

Right now, school boards across the state are working to finalize their budgets in preparation for warning their annual meetings. Most school district annual meetings are held in March on Town Meeting Day. The ongoing pandemic presents significant challenges in running safe elections, especially for those districts that normally vote "from the floor."

Under Vermont law, only the vote of a school district's voters allows a district to switch to an Australian ballot system. But the Legislature passed Act 162 last fall, allowing a school board to vote to use Australian ballot if the district normally votes from the floor at the annual meeting. Additionally, the Senate will soon be considering H.48 which authorizes school boards (1) to vote to move the date of their 2021 annual meeting to a date later in 2021 and (2) to require the municipal clerk to mail Australian ballots to all of the active registered voters in the municipality for the 2021 annual meeting.

We understand that the General Assembly is on course for an expedited passage of this bill. In light of the importance of this action to local school officials, we want to ensure the Committee understands the effects of H.48 on school districts, especially the provision allowing municipalities to move the date of their 2021 annual meeting.

Many school districts are now unified union districts which cross town lines and include several towns. I spoke with a school board member earlier this week from a unified district that includes 9 towns. The board is anticipating

the passage of H.48 and so it is communicating with those 9 towns about plans for its upcoming annual meeting and coordinating with the towns. So far, 6 of the 9 towns seem to be on board to coordinate with the school district by not changing the date of town meeting but there are 3 towns that have not decided how they will proceed. If those 3 towns decide to move the date of their town meetings, it raises logistical and legal questions for the school district's annual meeting - so many questions in fact that the school board will need to have its legal counsel attend its next meeting to ensure that it makes an informed, legal decision and prepares its warning properly.

Because of the complexities involved with allowing changes to the date of annual meetings, it is important that state officials take the lead with an organized communications strategy to encourage towns and school districts to align their votes. Clear, concise and timely communications (starting now) are critically important so that school boards can consider the implications of the legislation in their preparations for school district annual meetings.

VSBA provided a webinar yesterday, with the help of the Secretary of State's Office, to provide school board members with the most up to date information on H.48 and answer questions. We are also working with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to send a unified message to school boards and select boards on the importance of coordinating and aligning their annual meetings.

This year's budget process will be uniquely challenging due to the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are hopeful that Vermont communities will continue their tradition of supporting public education by approving school district budgets. When VSBA has more information about the status of school budgets, I would be happy to update the Senate Education Committee.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the Committee today. I look forward to working with you to address the COVID-related needs of school districts and ensure a high-quality public education for every Vermont student.