

## **Vermont Superintendents Association**

To: Vermont House Education Committee

From: Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent for the Slate Valley UUSD, VSA Trustee  
Jeff Francis, Executive Director, VSA

Re: Testimony of the Vermont Superintendents Association - S.138 - School Safety

Date: April 13, 2023

Good morning, Committee Members. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to provide testimony on S.138.

By way of introduction, Jeff Francis is the executive director for the Vermont Superintendents Association, a nonprofit membership organization of Vermont's school superintendents that engages in the public policy arena in support of the improvement of laws and regulations governing Vermont's public education system.

Brooke Olsen-Farrell is a 24 year veteran educator and the Superintendent of Schools for the Slate Valley Unified Union School District. Brooke is a Trustee for the Vermont Superintendents Association and the Association's liaison to the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team. The Slate Valley UUSD encompasses the towns of Fair Haven, Castleton, Benson, Orwell, West Haven and Hubbardton in Addison and Rutland Counties. The school district includes five schools and serves approximately 1,300 students.

It is useful to note that Brooke and the Slate Valley UUSD are recognized as leaders with respect to matters of school safety and security initiatives in Vermont - in some ways brought to that status experientially, having, thankfully, averted a school shooting in 2018 at Fair Haven Union High School.

With respect to S.138 as it passed the Senate, in general, we want to express support for strengthening the focus on laws to increase school safety and security measures through amendments to existing statute. This effort was emphasized by the Agency of Education, the Vermont Department of Public Safety and the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team in 2018 but progress to see the statutes strengthened was thwarted by the pandemic.

With respect to provisions of S.138 specifically, we wish to make the following points:

- 1) The Vermont Superintendents Association supports Section 1 requiring that school boards adopt a policy mandating that each school site conduct options-based response drills in the fall and spring of the academic year. The drills will be conducted according to guidance issued by the Vermont School Safety Center and the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team. The guidance that will be provided to schools will include trauma-informed best practices for the implementation of the options-based response drills and superintendents will report the completion of the drills to the Secretary of Education.

We believe that codifying the requirement for policy oversight and assurance for conducting trauma-informed options based drills at each school site twice annually is an important and useful improvement to existing school safety laws.

- 2) With respect to Section 2, we support the requirement for each supervisory union or district to adopt and maintain an all-hazards emergency operations plan for each school site that conforms to a template maintained by the Vermont School Safety Center. The bill requires an annual review and update of the plan undertaken in collaboration with local emergency first responders and emergency management officials. This requirement is consistent with best practice and will help to ensure that school personnel and emergency services are well prepared in the event of hazard-related emergencies.
- 3) We also support the provisions of Section 3, which require each school board to adopt an access control and visitor management policy that requires that all school sites maintain building security by locking exterior doors during the school day, requiring that visitors gain access to the building and sign in at a centralized entry point. This is good practice and will enhance building security. The provision includes an allowance for exceptions to the requirement associated with specific uses such as recreational or agricultural activities, but those case-specific exceptions must be included in the policy.
- 4) With respect to Section 4, Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams, we want to convey that we support a requirement that schools conduct best practice aligned behavioral threat assessments.

That stated, we believe that this section of S.138 requires more work, and we recommend that the Committee allow various parties of interest, including the Vermont Superintendents Association, the Vermont School Boards Association, the Vermont Principals Association, Vermont Legal Aid/Disability Law Project, the Vermont Agency of Education and the Vermont Department of Public Safety

(Vermont School Safety Center) and the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team some additional time in order to get the language concerning behavioral threat assessment into the best possible form.

Our current thinking is that, in addition to the requirement for behavioral threat assessments, that the section needs to address the following considerations and provisions (these are all considerations that should and can be further reviewed and presumably agreed to by the parties of interest indicated above):

- a. Definition of a Threat- It is critical that there is a uniform and consistent understanding of when this process should be employed. *A threat can be defined as a concerning communication or behavior which indicates that an individual poses a danger to the safety of students or school staff through acts of violence or other behavior that would cause harm to self or others. A threat may be communicated behaviorally, orally, visually, in writing, electronically or through any other means.*
- b. Requirement for a school district to have a policy with corresponding procedures. A policy gives the authority to the superintendent to develop district procedures on how a threat assessment team will operate, assess and address dangerous or violent situations which may pose a threat to the safety of students and the school community. Furthermore, it should require the district to identify the assessment team members; the team should be multidisciplinary in nature. As you want to ensure that there are varying points of view and that the access to information and resources is broad. It should provide guidance to students and school staff regarding recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior and identify members of the school community to whom threatening behavior should be reported. Finally it should identify appropriate interventions and the referral process to community services or health care providers for evaluation or treatment as appropriate.
- c. Storage of information collected/results of the threat assessment; where is the information housed? This should be separate from a student disciplinary record. Copies of threat assessments should be sent to the central office for review and kept in a file separate from a student's disciplinary record. Schools should be required to keep threat assessments on file for a specified amount of time.
- d. Further clarification that assessments shall be conducted consistent with exclusionary discipline rules, IDEA and 504. Threat

assessments are not disciplinary in nature. They are intended to disrupt the pathway to violence by providing supportive and protective measures. Removing students from school does not eliminate the risk to the school community.

- e. Details of the training required. What is the appropriate standard of training?
  - i. For example, while the current language indicates that the team should receive training annually in best practices of conducting behavioral threat assessments it does not indicate resources that should be referred to such as the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), National Associate of School Psychologists (NASP), The National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NABITA) and the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Model.
- f. Clarification of the composition and organization of behavioral threat assessment teams and the fact that threat assessments are case-specific.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We are happy to answer your questions.