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April 11, 2024

Dear Members of the House Ways and Means and Education Committees,

Representatives of the Vermont School Boards Association, the Vermont Superintendents Association and the Vermont Association of School Business Officials met throughout the day yesterday, Wednesday, April 10, to review the draft yield bill that is under discussion in the House Ways and Means Committee. We do not support the bill.

Typically, the yield bill serves as the vehicle for setting the yield and for minor policy changes. This year, however, on a very short timeline, it is being proposed as the vehicle for extremely substantive policy changes. The compressed timeline for review and consideration is especially problematic given the complexity of the proposed changes both in terms of application and presumed results. Furthermore, advancing legislation that has the potential to dramatically change the education funding system without transparent, accurate modeling, in our experience, is unprecedented.

Since the beginning of the legislative session, there has been an ongoing review of Vermont's education delivery system and an exploration of what is behind this year's rise in school costs, with hours of review and testimony in both the Ways and Means Committee and the Education Committee. The most comprehensive and topically substantive of those discussions has occurred during joint meetings of the two committees, and we are concerned that the yield bill does not sufficiently take into consideration the essence of that work.

Our Associations have presented well-informed, expert testimony from school board members and school administrators on the topic of the cost of education and the delivery system. At every turn, we have urged a collaborative, thoughtful and substantive policy approach to addressing the costs of the education system. We don't believe that the yield bill honors that approach, and believe that it misses the mark in putting Vermont on the path toward an equitable, cost-efficient and effective education delivery system that will serve every child and every community well into the future.

With respect to the specific provisions of the bill, we mostly see approaches that are intended to affect voter behavior in a manner that will continue the pattern of school budget rejections while doing very little in the way of achieving local and state collaboration in better managing the

costs of education. Singularly and in combination, several of the provisions will adversely affect a district's ability to develop and present a budget that is timely and builds trust.

We believe that this yield bill, without doing anything to address the root causes of the education cost trajectory, would result in the defeat of more school budgets. Further, while not doing anything to constructively and sustainably address system wide cost drivers, certain provisions of the bill will contribute to a random pattern of budget defeats.

The bill does nothing to address the cost shifts to local school districts of our failing mental health system. It does nothing to prevent the General Assembly from adding large scale programmatic cost burdens - like universal school meals and the ill-conceived PCB program - onto the backs of property tax payers. It does nothing to address the costs associated with operating a parallel education delivery system that relies on private schools and third-party providers of ancillary services when the public education system has existing space and capacity. The bill does nothing to support local school officials in contending with dramatic and crippling annual increases in the high cost of health insurance. It does nothing to assist, through well-reasoned policy approaches and the collaboration that we have been calling for, local school districts in optimizing school facilities, right-sizing school staff and achieving strategic mergers. And, it does nothing to make the reasons behind the increasing costs of public education more transparent to the taxpayer.

The challenges reflected in the paragraph above are not entirely the making of local events and local decisions. On the contrary, in most instances they are the manifestation of state decisions and/or local actions in response to state decisions. That is why we believe that getting a handle on the cost of education in Vermont and getting serious about addressing costs must be collaborative work.

Unfortunately, the yield bill does not reflect the dire need for collaboration and a willingness on the part of state officials to achieve it. What it does is attempt to make it harder to get voter approval for the funds local budget makers believe are necessary to meet current obligations brought about by local and state actions and then leaves local officials alone to pick up the pieces.

For these reasons, we do not support the yield bill.

The Vermont School Boards Association  
The Vermont Superintendents Association  
The Vermont Association of School Business Officials  
The Vermont Principals Association