

House Education and Ways and Means Committees – Education Spending Hearing
Rep. Kari Dolan, Waitsfield and Rep. Dara Torre, Moretown Testimony
April 4, 2024

Thank you for this opportunity to present to you today. I am Rep. Kari Dolan from the Washington-2 District. These comments are from me and my district mate, Rep. Dara Torre. I preface my remarks by acknowledging the important work of our schools. School staff show up every day to get our kids to school, and to teach, mentor, support and inspire them.

As you are fully aware, the historic number of failed school budgets following Town Meeting Day is an indicator of affordability – marking how Vermonters has perhaps reached a tipping point regarding the lack of affordability of our education funding system in its current state.

One of our concerns with the “local control” component of our funding system is that it is a system of high stakes. Having the school budget vote as the only cost-management strategy is fundamentally unfair to our school boards and superintendents. Additionally, failed budgets affect staff morale, our ability to attract teachers to the profession, and the cohesiveness of our communities.

I thank you for your commitment to get all interested parties to the table. I ask that you consider:

1. One more injection of state funding to address this year’s shortfall, accompanied by timely information to school districts, in fairness to school districts and taxpayers. Districts faced substantial increases in costs beyond their control but received little if any guidance from the Agency of Education and the Legislature on managing costs.
2. A simpler system that more closely ties local voting on school budgets to property tax rates. Taxpayers and school districts need more predictability and transparency.
3. A commitment to address statewide drivers that have shifted funding from the General Fund via state agency budgets and special funds to the Education Fund, such as in the delivery of mental health or counseling services, or in the remediation of PCB contamination. Addressing this concern pertaining to delivery of mental health and counseling services will have an equally important benefit of restoring the strength of our mental health delivery system for families and students statewide.
4. A system designed to improve both the delivery of quality education programming and greater economies of scale.
5. Partnerships with communities and public school districts, using school infrastructure funds as an incentive, to help schools conduct maintenance and capital improvements. Such incentives must cover any fit-up costs necessary to achieve economies of scale targets such as in class size and staff-to-student ratio targets.
6. Guarantees of nondiscrimination in the use of public education funds. And,
7. A formal replacement of a portion of the property tax with other state revenues, such as income tax revenues. This action would provide greater clarity in how the system considers income sensitivity, eases up on property taxes, and restores more of the property tax for municipal use.