

House Education and Ways and Means Hearing April 4, 2024
Rep. Laura Sibia, Dover Testimony

Thank you for pulling back on the tax cap earlier this session before most budgets were voted - that was difficult, but I appreciated the communication and time local officials and voters had to adjust, even though it was short.

We do not have time or political cover to change the education fund mechanism again this year. Changing the rules on funding after most districts have voted on their budgets, and some have also already re-voted, will add more fuel to a fire that the Governor and the Legislature have created.

In preparing my testimony, I have reflected on my own family's experiences, we encountered significant challenges, including poverty and abandonment. The small public K-12 in my isolated southern Vermont town played a pivotal role in where I and my 11 siblings find ourselves today. Accessible quality public education is one of the most important publicly obligated opportunities many rural and poor kids will have to change their destiny. I am committed to advocating for those kids every day.

Twenty-seven years ago, Act 60 was introduced to reform Vermont's education finance system, aiming to equalize funding among school districts, reduce property tax rate disparities, and ensure equitable access to education resources. However, it fell short in addressing differences in educating various student demographics, resulting in funding disparities that adversely affected rural and poor students and taxpayers for two decades.

While Act 127 eventually rectified this injustice after more than a decade of effort, the correction is one of the things causing a shock to the financing of our system. Another is our repeated failure to provide proper state level technical support and guidance to a distributed system undergoing massive demographic change. Another is opting to buy down the rates rather than provide long term sustained help for our local districts to adjust. Another is the governor and legislature continually buying more things out of the education fund.

Thank you for inviting testimony on the FY25 Yield Bill and Education Finance reform. I have some suggestions:

1. Acknowledge that one of the main drivers of the current difficulties facing students and taxpayers are the actions and inactions of the Governor and the Legislature.
2. Acknowledge that there are deserved trust issues in this system.
3. Avoid deceptive practices or attempts to conceal information from stakeholders.
4. Build consensus on the problem(s) to be solved and the goals to be achieved. My vote is to ensure a more sustainable and stable governance and funding system capable of delivering high quality education throughout the state - but let's do the work to find consensus in Vermont.

5. Recognize your limitations: seek appropriate help designing that public process to re-engage our communities in goal setting and problem solving and then publicly implementing
6. Be intentional about providing clear and accessible information to stakeholders.
7. Get qualified public education leaders in the administrative seats ASAP. Here is a proposal I have sponsored to do this:
 - a. H.851 An act relating to creating a Department and Commissioner of Education and amending the duties and composition of the State Board of Education (2024 HED)
8. Draw bright lines around the education fund - differentiate between local decision making and state directed spending. This will help us to be more accountable.
9. Let's do our job of providing oversight: same rules for the same dollars. I've proposed multiple examples to your committees:
 - a. H.113 An act relating to the public, pious, or charitable uses property tax exemption (2023 W&M)
 - b. H.258 An act relating to the provision of State-funded education in districts that do not maintain an elementary or high school (2023 HED)
10. Let's stop making the problem worse in the interim. I've proposed a suggestion on this:
 - a. H.634 An act relating to school closures and the designation (2024 HED)
11. We need to stop buying down rates. This is exacerbating the problem and delaying needed conversations.