



April 22, 2024

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

This letter is sent to you with the full authorization and agreement of the Board of Trustees for the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA).

Since Zoie Saunders was announced as Governor Scott's selection as his Secretary of Education, the Vermont Superintendents Association has largely refrained from making public comments relative to the appointment.

That stated, superintendents and the Vermont Superintendents Association are keenly interested in the appointment just as they are of all facets of Vermont's education delivery system.

VSA believes that it is important to be respectful of Ms. Saunders - both professionally and personally. Ms. Saunders should be afforded the courtesy of a fair evaluation, just as anyone should regardless of circumstances. Superintendents know all too well the toll that lack of respect in public discourse can take on an individual and a community.

In her short time as Secretary, Ms. Saunders has met in several online meetings with superintendents. Each of these meetings could be characterized as courtesy "meet and greet" events.

During my tenure as executive director for VSA, its leaders and members have worked in close partnership with the Secretary (Commissioner) on hundreds of issues. The working norm has been one of close collaboration and mutual trust, even through the most difficult times and while tackling the most challenging issues.

Regrettably, and relevant to the confirmation process, is the fact that currently trust between the field and the Administration - as represented by the Governor and his State Board of Education - is at a low point.

There are a number of reasons for this, but most significant is the fact that in recent years the Governor and his State Board of Education have seemingly been ill-disposed toward public education and, in some instances, those working within it. This dynamic is exacerbated by a policy framework with limited checks and balances – a State Board of Education appointed exclusively by the Governor and the Secretary of Education as a member of the Governor’s Cabinet.

In the Governor’s case, he has used his bully pulpit to rail against the cost of public education while doing little to demonstrate an understanding of the factors underlying those costs and to respond to them in a manner that reflects that understanding. As for the State Board, the perception is that its highest priority is to protect private schools from equitable regulatory oversight and the pressures associated with an education system for which change seems both necessary and inevitable.

This absence of trust is highly relevant because it affects the dynamics under which any incoming Secretary would be starting their tenure.

Under even ideal conditions, superintendents would be hoping for a secretary who has a specific set of relevant credentials including:

- 1) A devotion to public education demonstrated through their professional experience and prior work record.
- 2) Knowledge, expertise and leadership in K-12 public education as evidenced by academic qualifications and experiences reflecting an extensive and successful record of work in the K-12 arena.
- 3) A proven commitment to collaborating with all of the fellow leaders and partners necessary to achieve success for the State through its education system.
- 4) A deep understanding of, to use the phrase often referenced by former Education Secretary Dan French, Vermont’s public education ecosystem.

It is not evident that Ms. Saunders possesses any of these qualifications.

While the lack of one or more of these credentials should not, on its face, be a non-starter in terms of suitability to serve as Secretary of Education, the absence of any or all of them will put the Secretary and the education delivery system at a significant disadvantage.

One especially large disadvantage is that, without a dramatic change in the current dynamics, an inexperienced Secretary will be attempting to lead in an environment lacking the trust and goodwill necessary to get necessary work done.

Given present conditions, it seems plausible that the Secretary may not have the direction, encouragement or authorization from the Governor to work with the public education community and the General Assembly to bring greater equity to the system and to collaborate in addressing the cost and quality of the system overall.

The Senate could help the situation by signaling to the Governor that, for the good of Vermont, it is requesting a collaborative approach to strengthening the public education system for the children, families, and taxpayers it is intended to serve.

One way to do that would be to call for the appointment of a Secretary who will enter the role possessing indisputable public education leadership credentials and who demonstrates an unquestionable commitment to working collaboratively to achieve the outcomes that a highly effective and equitable education system will contribute to the vitality of the State and its citizens.

Thank you.

Best,

Jeffrey Francis
Executive Director
Vermont Superintendents Association

cc: VSA Board of Trustees and Membership