

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: April 23, 2024
RE: Nomination of Zoie Saunders as Secretary of Education

Thank you for accepting Vermont-NEA’s written comments on the nomination of Zoie Saunders as Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Education. Vermont-NEA shares the concerns raised by the Vermont School Boards Association (“VSBA”) and the Vermont Superintendents Association (“VSA”). Additionally, these comments are based upon Ms. Saunder’s publicly known professional background and experience, her conversation with Vermont-NEA President Don Tinney on Tuesday, March 26, and her interactions here in Vermont since she started as the Secretary on Monday, April 15, 2024.

Public education in Vermont is at a critical moment for many reasons, but most notably because of recent US Supreme Court decisions and policy decisions that have exacerbated the fiscal stress under which Vermont’s public school system operates.

Ms. Saunders’ lack of understanding and experience in either of these areas gives us tremendous pause as to her ability to be a successful Secretary of Education. For example, she admitted in her Vermont Public interview that she doesn’t understand our education funding system at all and will have to learn on the job. That will leave school leaders to fend for themselves at a most crucial time. VSA’s letter makes the point that Vermont’s educational leaders need a Secretary of Education who understands the Vermont public education system and has experience in a public school. Ms. Saunders lacks any such experience, and stepping into Vermont’s current education system right now will affirmatively erode public trust in Vermont’s k-12 system, including those who work in Vermont’s public schools, including para-educators, bus drivers, teachers, principals, and superintendents.

Likewise, VSBA’s comments focus on Ms. Saunders’ lack of experience, except for her seven (7) years’ experience not as the leader of an organization but as a policy expert at a private for-profit charter school management entity. VSBA’s members are particularly focused on organizational leadership, which they are uniquely qualified to assess since that is their primary job as school board members—selecting a leader in the form of a superintendent. Their “extreme concerns” that Ms. Saunders’ lack of organizational leadership experience is a clarion call to not recommend her nomination to be Vermont’s Secretary of Education.

At this most crucial moment the question we are left with is: Can Vermont’s public education system afford to teach Ms. Saunders while she’s serving as the Secretary of Education? We do not believe that is a luxury we can afford.