



To: Senate Education Committee  
From: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director  
Re: Introduction to the Vermont School Boards Association  
Date: January 18, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee about the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA). In order to help the committee understand the work of the VSBA, I will briefly talk about the role of school boards in Vermont before getting into specifics about the VSBA.

### **THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS**

School boards are not involved in the day-to-day operations of schools. Their job is to provide high level, student-focused oversight and assure the delivery of an effective education program in their communities at a reasonable cost for taxpayers in accordance with state and federal law.

School boards have six areas of responsibility at the local level:

- Engage the community to establish a vision for the school district
- Adopt policies
- Hire a superintendent and establish clear expectations
- Develop a budget and provide financial oversight
- Monitor progress towards the vision
- Operate in an ethical and effective manner

To serve on a school board is to uphold the great American tradition of a free, public education for all. This tradition forms the foundation of our democracy: a well-informed citizenry. It is extremely important that students develop critical and independent thinking skills and that they understand how history can impact the future. Simply put, education is crucial for the future of our state and school boards play an important role in Vermont's education system.

## **ABOUT THE VSBA**

Incorporated in 1961, the VSBA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The articles of incorporation filed with the Secretary of State's office in 1961 indicate that the organization was established for the following purposes:

- To promote and stimulate interest in education
- To cooperate with other organized educational groups
- To assist school directors in promoting better educational opportunities for the children of Vermont

The vision and mission of the organization have evolved over time, and are included in the VSBA's bylaws. The vision and mission were updated in 2022 after a comprehensive strategic planning process.

As part of the strategic planning process, the VSBA Board developed the following eight beliefs:

1. That public education is the foundation of and for democracy.
2. The VSBA represents school boards in Vermont.
3. Public education in Vermont is critically important for a healthy democracy, is the engine that drives economic development, and is the core of a strong community.
4. School boards and their communities need to understand the jobs, roles, and responsibilities of school boards and their members; and boards need to have professional development to be effective and efficient in their roles.
5. Public education is the greatest equalizer.
6. Education is a fundamental right.
7. Vermont is a state where every student has equitable access to a world class public education, and our students are driven by their aspirations, through empowered school boards, who are ensuring student success.
8. The VSBA is the glue that ties together local school boards, and is respectful of different positions of school boards.

These eight beliefs are the foundation on which the vision and mission were built.

**Vision:** The VSBA is the trusted leadership organization advancing the essential work of Vermont school boards so that each and every student is supported in their educational journey.

**Mission:** Develop and provide systems and resources that support school boards and their members, informed through inclusive community engagement.

The VSBA is a membership organization. We understand that not all school board members see every issue the same way. The VSBA has clear processes for taking positions as an organization, but it is possible you will hear from individual school board members who have a different perspective. We welcome all school board members to share their views with the VSBA and with legislators.

The VSBA has a 24 member board of directors: a president, immediate past president and 22 regional representatives – 2 representatives elected from each of 11 regions. The President is elected from among active board members at the August meeting of each year, to serve a term from November 1 to October 31 of the following year. Neil Odell of Norwich is the current President of the Association. You may see him testify on issues before your committee during the legislative session.

The VSBA is governed by bylaws, resolutions and policies. Resolutions are positions taken by the Association on issues of importance to Vermont school boards. They may include recommendations for action by the VSBA, local school boards, the Legislature, the Executive Branch or other decision-making bodies. Resolutions are guidance for staff and the VSBA board when they are working in the public policy arena or developing programs and services for the members. They are approved by membership at the annual business meeting of the Association each October.

New resolutions passed by VSBA membership in October of 2022 covered the following topics: public funds accountability, district quality standards, funds to assist school districts with PCB and radon remediation, and universal meals.. If I testify to your committee on these topics, I will provide the specific language of the relevant resolution in my written testimony. You can find the [full list of VSBA resolutions here](#). In the absence of a resolution on a particular topic, the VSBA board or its legislative committee provide guidance to VSBA staff.

The VSBA has four full-time staff: Sue Ceglowski (Executive Director), Sandra Cameron (Associate Executive Director), Phil Gore (Director of Board Services) and Kerri Lamb (Director of Operations).

The VSBA provides the following services and resources to its members:

#### Board Development & Support

The VSBA provides many training opportunities for school board members, including monthly webinars, workshops on the Essential Work of Vermont School Boards, board retreats, customized in-district board development, teambuilding, and workshops to advance educational equity. We have extensive resources online. VSBA's annual conference and regional meetings serve to share best practices and foster a learning community among school board members.

Our resources and services have long been informed by best practices, research, and examples from across Vermont. We are updating our curriculum this year to support a school board's success in meeting and exceeding the upcoming District Governance Standards.

Act 127 of 2022 requires each Vermont school district to meet school district quality standards adopted by rule of the AOE regarding the business, facilities management, and governance practices of school districts. The Secretary of Education asked VSBA to develop draft governance standards for his consideration, to be incorporated in the newly required district quality standards. This past summer and fall, the VSBA did this work by convening a task force of eleven school board members from across the state.

Before outlining their work, the task force met with the Secretary. The Secretary asked that the "initial version of governance standards should be clear, defensible, and general in nature. These standards should not endeavor to describe every aspect of school district governance, but rather general principles of good governance that most school boards in Vermont would view as being important." He asked that the standards include a description of community engagement in meeting educational outcomes for all students, a regular evaluation of the superintendent, and transparency and ethical governance practices.

In conducting its work, the task force reviewed national research on best practices in governance, particularly those studies relating to how boards may affect student outcomes and support closing achievement gaps. They invited input from all publicly elected school board members, superintendents, and representatives from the Act I working group.

The final version of the proposed draft standards was approved by the full VSBA Board. It recognizes that effective governance by school boards is an essential component in district quality and outlines three categories for effective governance: Priorities, Protocols, and Processes. The [proposed draft standards are linked here](#) for your information.

### Consulting Services

The VSBA supports member boards with operational or management challenges and strategic planning needs. Specialized consultation services are available to help with superintendent searches and evaluations, strategic planning, governance transitions, and Policy Governance.

### Legal and Policy Services

The VSBA provides consultation regarding legal questions, updates on changes to laws and regulations, legal training for boards and superintendents, and general collective bargaining support. In conjunction with Vermont School Boards Insurance Trust (VSBIT), the VSBA also publishes model school board policies and conducts policy audits through its Vermont Education Policy Service.

### Communications

VSBA keeps all members up to date on new education policies and laws through the VSBA website, weekly update emails issued each Tuesday, a newsletter, regular legislative reports,

regional meetings and our annual conference. The VSBA also publishes the *Vermont Education Law Book* and *Essential Work of Vermont School Boards* which is a model for effective education governance.

### Educational Equity

The VSBA is committed to the success of every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, family economics, class, geography, ability, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or initial proficiencies. The VSBA works to promote principles of equity within all policies, operations, practices, and resource allocations.

The VSBA Equity Definition:

*Each student receives the resources and educational opportunities they need to learn and thrive.*

- *Equity means that a student's success is not predicted nor predetermined by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, family economics, class, geography, ability, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or initial proficiencies.*
- *Equity means that every school provides and every student has access to high quality culturally responsive curriculum, programs, teachers and administrators, extracurricular activities and support services to meet the needs of each and every student.*
- *Equity goes beyond formal equality where all students are treated the same. Achieving equity may require an unequal distribution of resources and services.*
- *Equity involves acknowledging and disrupting inequitable practices, acknowledging biases, employing practices that reflect the reality that all students will learn, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children.*

In 2021-22, we collaborated with two consultant teams to address educational equity in a variety of ways. One of the consultants advised the VSBA on equity considerations within 11 model policies. The other consultant provided real-time support to Board Chairs and Superintendents facing challenging situations related to equity. We also provided webinars to advance equity through the consultants and Outright Vermont. In addition to providing these and many other resources on educational equity, we are currently developing a curriculum and related materials for school boards to support their work in analyzing and responding to data on student achievement outcomes.

The VSBA has recently been awarded grant funds to develop an affinity group for its members. The purpose of an affinity group is to share stories, experiences, ideas, successes and to provide a space for school board members across the state to network and make connections on issues of educational equity. Because it's essential that board members of color have a voice in identifying and removing barriers and developing solutions to create more equitable student outcomes, VSBA's first affinity group will bring together school board members who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC).

## Advocacy

In the interest of improving public education for each and every student, the VSBA provides representation of its membership, which consists of over 900 locally elected officials, in the General Assembly and in public policy development with the Agency of Education, the State Board, and with various education organizations. At times, the VSBA is tasked by the General Assembly to be a member of legislative committees, task force groups, and advisory councils and we assign staff and/or Directors to these roles.

## **PRIORITIES FOR THE SESSION**

I will now move on to VSBA's priorities for this legislative session.

First, I would like to highlight the significant facilities needs across the state. The state has not provided any support for school construction since 2007 and it shows in the condition of our school buildings. The condition of some buildings is causing significant health and safety issues. It's also an equity issue - some school districts are able to garner the local community's support for renovations or new construction while others are not. Research shows that the quality of school facilities impact student achievement. Simply put - inequities in school buildings can lead to inequities for students.

Along with serious concerns about the general condition of school buildings, the VSBA advocates that the Legislature allocate funds to assist school districts with PCB and radon remediation when contamination is identified under the state mandated testing, including districts whose contamination was discovered prior to the legislation and irrespective of costs covered by capital bonding.

Second, I would draw your attention to the increasing mental health needs of Vermont's students. This topic has been mentioned by several other witnesses. We hope you will take mental health needs into account when considering how to handle any excess in the Education Fund. Rather than returning that money to taxpayers to reduce property tax rates as suggested by the Governor, we recommend using it to provide facilities aid and to address the mental health needs of Vermont's students. Additionally, since it appears that the surplus exists at least partially due to lower special education spending, please consider using it to help school districts address their special education needs - districts are facing challenges under the new census block funding for special education, specifically the block grant funds are substantially less than expected in some districts, causing them to eliminate positions.

Finally, VSBA advocates ensuring educational equity in the wake of the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Carson v. Makin*. The most recent VSBA resolution related to this topic passed in October 2022 at the annual meeting. The resolution calls for public funds accountability and advocates that all rules, regulations, policies, quality standards, reporting requirements and laws regarding public schools in Vermont must apply to any school that receives funds from the statewide education fund, for any reason or for any purpose. As part of the Education Equity Alliance, VSBA supports the values of equity, transparency and

accountability. We are open to any reforms that align with these values and that pass Supreme Court muster.

**CONCLUSION**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the Committee today. We look forward to working with you in the upcoming session.