



Main Campus
51 Charles Ave
Middlebury, VT 05753
North Campus
372 Mainelli Rd
Middlebury, VT 05753

TO: House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
FROM: Nicole MacTavish, Superintendent/Director, Patricia A. Hannaford Regional Technical School District.
DATE: March 19, 2025
RE: Testimony on Career Technical Education

I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about the future of Career Technical Education in Vermont.

I come to you with a slightly different background, in that I have been an educational leader for over 25 years, in 4 states, and in three countries. For most of my career I have served in public school districts, but I have also led in the charter school world, in the private school sector, in the military world, and in several non-profits.

As our active-duty Navy family moved around the world, I had the opportunity to serve in districts of all kinds; small, medium and large districts, districts with rich resources and those with little, rural, suburban and urban districts, homogenous and diverse districts, and international districts. The smallest district where I served had under 200 students, the largest, over 26,000.

I have had the opportunity to lead at the building level, as both a middle school principal and a high school principal, as well as at the district level as a Curriculum Director, a Special Education Director, an Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, a Deputy Superintendent, a Chief Academic Officer, and a Superintendent.

I understand both the world of preK-12 school districts, and the world of Career Technical Education. I know where they overlap well, working in concert with one another, and I understand the tensions that sometimes arise in the systems.

I give you this background only to set the stage for my comments today, and to open the door to reach out after today with any questions. I am happy to help in any way I can.

I do not envy you the task ahead, as committees wrestle with proposed changes to a complex, and incredibly high stakes, system of public education.

My comments today cover two areas.

1. The first is a set of comments about the larger picture of transformation taking place in Vermont's public education landscape, and CTE's place in that landscape.
2. The second is written testimony about the legislation at hand regarding 16 V.S.A. chapter 37, subchapter 5a.

Section 1: CTE in This Moment

CTE is Public Education:

- Career Technical Education is an integral part of the larger preK-12 public education picture. Making decisions about CTE outside the larger picture of what will happen with all of public education, will not serve students, or Vermont's economic development.
- Roughly 50% of high school graduates in the state of Vermont go on to college or university. Organizing our public education system around a pathway where students can move into high-skill, high-wage, high-demand careers, while also having the option to stay in Vermont, is critical not only to our students' success, but also to our communities.
- Vermont needs a way for young people to stay in Vermont, pursue careers that communities depend on, and earn wages high enough to live sustainably, support a family, and afford a home.

CTE is a Fantastic Investment:

- CTE is a tiny portion of the overall spending in public education. In Addison County, for example, our entire county's spending on public education next year will be \$123 million. Our CTE District accounts for only \$5.79 million, less than 4.45% of that, yet we serve 1 in every 3 high school students.
- CTE is a fantastic bang for the taxpayers' buck.
- CTE is critical to economic development. Until Vermont's housing shortage is behind us and our wages catch up, we will not be able to attract enough skilled labor to either replace retiring experts, or fill new opportunities created by thriving industry.
- By 2030, 1 in 3 Vermonters will be over 60. Skilled tradespeople and technical experts are retiring in droves, and not nearly enough young people are stepping in to these critical and high-paying careers.
- When we are operating at an unemployment rate of roughly 2%, we need every student graduating, ready for their next step in education or training, and ready to enter a high-demand career.

The Best CTE Governance Model? It Depends (on the rest of Public Education in Vermont)

- Right now, legislative committees all over this building are hard at work trying to determine next steps for Public Education in Vermont.
- Those decisions affect the recommendations about CTE Governance.

- A CTE Governance structure can only be determined after we understand the entire public school ecosystem.
- The answer will be different if there are 5 districts vs. 20 districts, if there are Supervisory Unions vs. School Districts, if there is a foundation formula or a local election process, if school choice stays status quo or expands, if the roll of the AOE or the Board of Education expands or contracts, if we adopt statewide graduation requirements or leave them up to local control, and a myriad of other factors.
- In order to best serve students, and to ensure robust Career Technical Programs grow and expand to meet industry needs, we have to know what context we are working with, and that will allow us to determine the best and most effective governance model.
- Making decisions about CTE governance, structure, or even funding, in a vacuum will not best serve students, communities, or industry.
- Only when CTE and preK-12 systems are aligned, can students access CTE.
- CTE cannot align with a system which is not yet even designed or funded.

Section 2: Comments about the Bill

Overall, this bill appears to create one, statewide, CTE district. This would replace the 4 independent CTE Districts as well as the CTE centers which are currently part of school districts or private schools.

Instead, the bill would stand up 15 regional service regions within the one CTE District. These new regional service regions largely align with our current CTE Districts and Centers, and their current catchment areas for students.

The bill also discusses governance for this new CTE district, which aligns largely, but not completely, with Vermont State Statutes describing the duties of public school boards in 16 VSA subsection 563.

There are some important distinctions, however, which are problematic to the overall idea of a single CTE District in the state, and which would limit the ability of such a CTE District and School Board to conduct the work of a district.

Missing Authorities:

If the idea is for the CTE district to function as a legitimate district, then it will need all of the powers and authorities granted other districts.

Missing from the new CTE District's authority, are a number of important powers which are currently granted by Vermont Statute to Public District School Boards, and are critical for district operation:

- The ability to relocate or discontinue use of a schoolhouse or facility.
- The ability to engage in short-term borrowing to cover the costs of projects approved, but where reimbursement will come at a later time.

- The ability to borrow money or issue bonds or notes in excess of anticipated revenue for the school year.
- The ability to make facilities available for public purposes.
- The ability to enter into contracts with other school boards to provide joint programs, services, facilities, and staffing.
- The ability to enter into contracts with a school offering distance learning.

Organization of Service Regions:

- Listed in the bill are numerous districts which may not end up actually being districts at the conclusion of the transformation of public education.
- The service regions are generally aligned to current service areas. This means that CTE centers which are currently full, and are turning away students, would continue to have the same problem, and CTE centers which are underenrolled would also continue to be underenrolled.
- As an example, in addition to offering stellar programming, Stafford Technical Center in Rutland has a robust catchment area from which to draw. Stafford's catchment area is 27 towns, containing around 2200 high school students. Compare that to the Patricia A. Hannaford Regional Technical School District which serves only 17 towns, with only around 1100 high school students in sending school districts.
- Stafford cannot accept all of the students who apply, and has to turn some students away. Whereas Hannaford, with half the number of high school students in our region, has excess capacity and would love to serve more students.

CTE School Board:

- A 15-member school board would be a challenging size to effectively provide governance. A smaller board would be more effective at governance, and have less volatility.
- Having all board members appointed by superintendents of each service region is problematic for a number of reasons.
- Sitting Board members generally already have two, long, board meetings per month, in their own school district. Adding one or two additional Board meetings to their plate would mean that they had a board meeting almost every week.
- Scheduling a board meeting made of 15 members from every region of the state would be significantly challenging, as most regions will have standing board meetings, and they will not be on the same schedules.
- A structure of 15 Board members across the state would almost certainly mean that Board meetings would largely be virtual. While this is technically doable, it is challenging in such a context for Board members themselves, and Board members and the Superintendent, to form the close relationships of respect and trust, so essential to effective governance.

- Having a CTE Board comprised of only Board members also sitting on other district Boards, moves us away from the current practice of having Board members appointed from industry. Our Board members from Industry are critical to ensuring our decisions align not only with public education, but also with the needs of industry, economic development, and labor sectors. It would be a huge loss to no longer have this influence on our boards.
- Of special concern is section 1574, number 10, which states that the Board only has to “consider the recommendation of the superintendent and center directors” in hiring and dismissing staff. A school Board has only one employee: the Superintendent. All other personnel in a district work for the Superintendent. This language sets up the Superintendent to be in conflict with the Board, and for the Superintendent to lack the needed authority to lead district personnel.

Voter Checklist:

- This section indicates that the CTE District will put out a budget each year for voter approval.
- This seems to be in conflict with work going on in other legislative committees, which are discussing a foundation formula/basic per-pupil funding mechanism.

Competitive Funding:

- The language in this section states that the CTE District will pass a budget, and then “calculate each service region’s share” and that this share “shall become a legal obligation of the school districts within the service region.”
- While this structure may be workable, this does not address the critical problem in the current system of a competitive funding model. Essentially, this is the same model, assuming that each service region’s share is based on the number of students attending the CTE District.
- VACTED has given testimony to this committee previously on the equity and access concerns for students when their CTE attendance negatively impacts the budget of their sending district.
- It is critical that we move away from a competitive funding model for CTE.

Incurring Debt:

- This section outlines the process for a CTE District to incur debt in order to improve facilities or acquire assets.
- The language here seems to conflict with the language in the section about Board authority, which does not allow for the CTE district to incur debt which cannot be paid off in the same fiscal year.
- The mechanism for incurring debt in this section is for the CTE district to have all voters in the district, which means all voters in the state, vote on the debt.

- It would be challenging to gain voter approval from voters across the entire state, to incur a large debt for one center, or one project, or one asset, which is physically located in a specific place in the state, far away. Voters might be reluctant to tax themselves for an improvement or asset that their own students will never even see.

Career Technical Courses in Other Schools:

- This section, which allows non-CTE high schools to offer both pre-technical and technical CTE courses, seems counterproductive to the intent of the bill.
- If all high schools offer CTE courses, then why would they send students to a CTE District? Especially if they would then incur additional costs?
- This approach would also spread financial resources too thin across CTE programs. The upside of have something like a consolidated CTE District or Districts, is that funding would be consolidated in such a way as to support the large equipment, vehicle, infrastructure, materials, and technical needs so critical for industry aligned CTE programs. If every high school offers CTE, and funds follow those offerings, then no entity will end up with sufficient funds to make critical purchases.

Credits and Grades Earned:

- This section appears to allow the CTE District to award high school credit directly. If this is the case, this would be a positive change, as it is a challenge currently.
- The language refers to the “minimum number of credits required by the State Board.” Currently, with Proficiency Based crediting in Vermont, there is no minimum number of credits required by the State Board. If the intent is to re-establish statewide minimum graduation requirements, it would be a positive change, as it is hugely problematic currently, where every district has locally determined graduation requirements.

Comprehensive High Schools:

- This section really muddies the waters. “A comprehensive high school shall be a career technical center. . . “
- If the intent is to pull all CTE into one district, this confuses that intent.

Transition Period:

- This section states that the newly formed CTE district will have to negotiate contractual agreements when they begin operating.
- The language seems to assume that all CTE teachers, and associated staff and administrators will be employed by the CTE district. If that is the case, language explicitly stating this will be needed, especially since in other sections of the bill there is contradictory language.
- The newly formed district will simply not be able to negotiate all of the labor agreements needed in this transition. The vast majority of teachers, staff, and administrators will

have multi-year Union Master Agreements in place, with their current districts. These do not vacate upon district dissolution. It will take professional mediators and leagues of lawyers to negotiate both transitional, and then follow-on, contracts.

- Similarly, transition of assets, land, facilities, and operating agreements, will also take leagues of lawyers and mediators. The newly formed CTE District will have neither the expertise, time, or most likely, funding, to accomplish this.
- At the CTE District's first official Board meeting, the Board "shall vote a sum sufficient to pay any unpaid balance of expenses" incurred during transition, and then charge the member districts those cost. It seems unlikely this would be well received by those receiving the bills.

Conclusion, and Thank You:

I very much appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today.

I spent my time with you today emphasizing that Career Technical Education *is* Public Education.

If we make decisions about CTE without deeply understanding the larger context of Vermont public education, then we might fail to create one, well-aligned system.

Our goal is to ensure more students, take more CTE, more of the time.

One of the shining stars in Vermont is Career Technical Education. It is, quite literally, the reason I moved my family half way around the world, to Vermont.

Having seen CTE systems throughout the United States, as well as in other countries, I can testify that Vermont does a spectacular job with CTE.

Let's take this once in a generation opportunity to take it to the next level.

With your help, we have the opportunity to align CTE with the entire public education system, for the benefit of students, communities, and Vermont's economic future.