

## Introduction H.179 School Governance Reform

Good Morning esteemed colleagues of House Education and members of the public.

I'm here this morning to introduce a bill that will strengthen the governance of our education system by transitioning from an Agency of Education to a Department of Education—one that ensures accountability to the people and prioritizes educational excellence over political influence.

For too long, the structure of our education system has been shaped by an agency directly accountable to the governor, rather than to the experts and stakeholders who understand education best. This bill seeks to realign that governance structure by making the Commissioner of Education answerable to the State Board of Education, rather than the governor's office.

Education should be driven by long-term vision, research-based policies, and the needs of students, parents, and educators—not by the shifting priorities of political administrations. Under the current structure, decisions about our schools are often influenced by political cycles rather than by what is best for our children.

This has led to inconsistent leadership, policy uncertainty, and a lack of continuity in long-term educational planning. The role of the commissioner—who should be a steward of educational integrity—has been constrained by gubernatorial influence, rather than being guided by the expertise of the State Board of Education.

This bill proposes a simple but powerful change: transforming the Agency of Education into a Department of Education, with a commissioner who is selected and overseen by the State Board of Education. This will:

1. **Ensure Stability and Expertise** – A commissioner answering to the State Board will be chosen based on experience and qualifications, rather than political alignment.
2. **Strengthen Accountability** – The State Board of Education, made up of education experts and community representatives, will have the authority to oversee rule making and policy implementation without interference from political leadership.
3. **Prioritize Long-Term Educational Success** – By removing education governance from the executive branch's direct control, we allow for a sustained focus on student outcomes, teacher support, and curriculum advancements without abrupt political shifts.

Other states have adopted similar models with success. States that have empowered independent education boards to oversee commissioners have seen increased policy stability, improved student outcomes, and greater trust in education governance. Furthermore, educational experts overwhelmingly agree that minimizing political interference leads to more effective and student-centered decision-making.

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This is not about politics; it is about the future of our children. It is about ensuring that decisions on curriculum, school funding, and teacher support are made by those who are most qualified—not by political administrations.

I urge my colleagues to stand with me in strengthening our education system by supporting this critical reform. Let's put education where it belongs: in the hands of those who dedicate their lives to its success.

Early in the session, we heard from the Vermont Superintendents Association that a key legislative priority is to “ensure proper checks and balances, such that one branch of government does not have total authority over appointments”.

We also heard in the legislative priorities from the Vermont Principals Association suggesting Vermont move “from an Agency to a Department of Education” stating that “the current construct makes the AOE simply an agency completely under the direction of the Governor and creates more opportunities for partisanship and politics.” That same testimony provided rationale for changing the composition of the State Board to better represent Vermont's students, 96% of whom attend public school.

Just last week we heard Dr. Wendy Baker share her belief that “this recommended shift (from an AOE to a Dept of Ed) is the most important action the legislature can take to put the state back on the right track toward improved students achievement because it will return educational leadership at the state level to ensure an apolitical, sustained focus on student outcomes and school and district viability.

Recently we received an update from Meagan Roy and the Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont that “the Commission was not involved in the development of the Administration's proposal. Members pointed out that the Administration developed and communicated this plan outside the legislatively-created Commission that was created to do just that: develop recommendations for changes to Vermont's education system. Slides describing the Administration's plan were emailed to the group **after** they had been presented to the legislature. Commission members maintain that they should have been involved in the development from the beginning, providing the kind of deep engagement that the legislature intended when it convened the Commission.” This is precisely why the time is now to address concerns about transparency and effectiveness that have eroded public confidence in the Agency of Education. Transitioning back to a department aligns with historical norms and best practices for state education governance.

Thank you for the opportunity to pitch this bill and I ask for your support in moving it forward.