



March 26, 2025

Thank you very much Chair Conlon for the opportunity to testify today. I'm sorry we could not be there in person - we would have preferred that but the quick turn around for this opportunity to testify today just didn't allow for that.

My name is Neil Odell and together with my colleague Krista Huling we are two board members of the organization Friends of Vermont Public Education. We are a nonprofit organization led by longtime school leaders, educators, and policy advocates from across the state. Combined, our board of directors include veteran school board members, three former presidents of the Vermont School Boards Association, two former members of the Vermont State Board of Education including a previous Chair, and a classroom educator. Together, we bring decades of hands-on experience with Vermont's education system and a layered understanding of how the decisions you make here in Montpelier impact our public education system.

We appreciate the recent discussions in your committee regarding class sizes at publicly funded schools. It raises a broader and more important question: what standards do we expect from any school receiving taxpayer dollars?

This is a pivotal moment for Vermont, and for each one of you as elected leaders. Education overhauls of the magnitude that you are considering do not come around often. While you are under the hood, you have the opportunity to take a step that is fair, fiscally sound, and rooted in the values Vermonters share across political lines.

Here is a key principle we hope you'll keep in mind as you engage in this work: Vermonters work hard for their money and they deserve to know how their tax dollars are being spent. Accountability and transparency in our system of taxation and the disbursement and use of those funds is a key component that helps to ensure public trust. Without that accountability and transparency the system risks collapse.

The State has a constitutional obligation to provide a public education. That costs money. In order to fund the cost to provide that education we tax all of our people (even non- Vermonters too via sales, rooms and meals taxes). It's a lot of money - over two billion dollars annually. Understandably, we want to know where the money is going and we also want to know how well our kids are doing for the money we spend. We want assurances that our money is being used in a fiscally responsible manner resulting in positive student outcomes. In order to do that we have put rules, regulations and standards in place to inform those key metrics.

The challenge is that we currently have two separate education systems in Vermont - a public school system and an independent school system - each with its own set of standards, rules and regulations - but each receiving the exact same public tax dollars.

We believe any school in Vermont that receives public dollars should meet the same clear criteria. This includes employing licensed educators, offering open enrollment, ensuring students are protected from dismissal without cause, following financial transparency requirements, adhering to curricular standards, reporting outcomes to the public, and meeting class size minimums where applicable. If the state determines that these are appropriate standards for Vermont schools, they should apply to all Vermont schools that benefit from the public's financial backing.

As you move forward with your work we encourage you to review the State Auditor's Report from 2020 entitled "Approved Independent [Private] Schools Are Not Subject to Most of the Statutes and Rules That Govern Public Schools" - a [link to that report](#) is included in my submitted testimony. It contains useful information on the differences between our public and private school system in Vermont. My colleague Krista Huling will also share some further observations on the differences in just a minute.

As you engage in this work we encourage you not to view this as punishing schools or taking options away. Instead, we see this as a call for basic fairness for families who pay taxes and for their children who attend public or independent schools. We are not asking you to close schools or cut off funding. Nor is this about ideology. This is simply about responsible public oversight.

A few days ago Chair Conlon acknowledged the need for your committee to signal clear priorities on scale, sustainability, and long-term direction. This is your opportunity to do just that. If Vermont is restructuring its education system and fails to address this fundamental inconsistency, we will not have modernized the system. We will have reinforced flaws that are both expensive and unfair.

We understand there is hesitation to take action on what has been twisted over the years into controversy, even if in reality it's simply logical. We know that you'll hear from others that this type of change is not needed or not necessary. Sometimes leadership means setting a standard and inviting others to follow it. We want you to know that we are here to support you in setting this new standard. Friends of Vermont Public Education will support you doing what is right for Vermont's taxpayers and for our children.

At this time I want to introduce you to Kirsta Huling. Not only is she a member of our Board of Directors for Friends, she is also the former chair of the State Board of Education and a current classroom educator. In these roles she's seen first hand the differences in our current public and independent school systems.

Sincerely,

Neil Odell - on behalf of:

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