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**March 26, 2025**

**To: Hon. Peter Conlon, Chair**  
**House Committee on Education**

**From: Sarah Copeland Hanzas, Secretary of State**  
**S. Lauren Hibbert, Deputy Secretary of State**  
**Sean Sheehan, Director, Elections and Campaign Finance**

**Re: Preliminary Considerations Related to Elections and School Redistricting**

Dear House Committee on Education,

The Secretary of State's Office preliminarily reviewed Governor Scott's School Redistricting Plan and we have been loosely following the conversation in the Senate and House Committees on Education. If a redistricting plan is implemented, accompanying changes in the election procedure and laws will also need to be made. As the policy decisions are still being weighed at this time and the legislative approach may shift throughout the session, we recommend using this document as a list of areas for consideration. The Secretary of State's Office (VTSOS) can advise and recommend changes to your committees as policy decisions become solidified and you move forward with a school redistricting elections bill.

The main areas of consideration are:

**District Lines and Wards**

*Initial District Lines and Wards:*

- VTSOS understands that there are many policy and fiscal considerations that will go into the creation of larger school districts. Legislation should establish the new district boundaries and the number of school board seats.
- The process of creating voting wards within new school districts should follow the principles of apportionment followed by the legislative apportionment board.
- Wards should be compact, contiguous, and drawn to achieve substantially equal weighting of the votes within each district. With rare exceptions, wards should respect current municipal boundaries.
- A School District Apportionment Board should be established by legislation. Support for the SDAB should include VTSOS, Vermont Center for Geographic Information, and a technical mapping expert.

- Roughly following the Legislative Apportionment Board model, a SDAB should have a chair and four or six members. Members of the SDAB should have substantial understanding of Vermont geography, trade, travel, and social interaction.
- The SDAB would need 2-4 months to complete ward boundaries, depending on the number of school districts established by the Legislature.
- Ward boundaries would need to be passed and signed into law by May 15 of the election year to allow for elections in the November General Election.

*Reapportionment for Wards:*

- Redistricting should happen every 10 years, in the biennium following legislative redistricting.

**School Board**

*Members of the School Board:*

- The Administration’s proposal calls for 5-member boards.
  - If a final plan creates larger boards, there should still be an odd number of members.
- Districts should be divided into apportioned wards.
  - Each ward should have one school board member.
- Terms: The legislature should determine the terms for School Board members.
  - VTSOS Assumes terms are 4 years and staggered– there should be provisions for two-year terms for some members in the November 2026 election. This would allow for school boards to not be completely new every 2 years.

*School Board Member Elections:*

- Timing: The Administration’s proposal calls for elections to occur in November of even years with the General Election. VTSOS supports putting this election on the November General Election ballot.
  - Since that election is a universal vote-by-mail election, VTSOS needs to prepare the ballots and manage the election. Preparation of that ballot drives when candidates will need to file a petition to run.
- School District Clerk: A clerk for the district will need to be identified.
  - The School District Clerk could be the town clerk in the largest municipality in the district, or a different process for determining the clerk could be established in the law.
- Petition Process: Candidates for a school board need to gather petitions signed by voters in the ward.
  - VTSOS suggests requiring 100 voters in the ward. This is the same as for the Senate.
  - Petitions would need to be filed in July.
  - Petitions could be filed with the School District Clerk or VTSOS. We would like to engage in this policy discussion.
  - The Governor’s proposal does not contemplate a primary, and therefore no party designation would be listed for school board races.

- Petitions would be entered into the VTSOS Vermont Election Management System (VEMS) – this is important for ballot production.
- Election Reporting: This would be done in the VEMS.
- Campaign Finance Laws: School board candidates must follow the campaign finance laws like candidates for other offices.

*District School Board Meetings:*

- Number of Meetings: There are several policy decisions here:
  - Is there a minimum number of meetings for a district/year?
  - Is there a minimum number of meetings in each ward?
- Open Meeting Law (OML):
  - These new bodies would be decision-making bodies; this means they must hold hybrid meetings under the OML.
  - Due to the potential size of the districts, VTSOS recommends treating them like state bodies and expressly stating that they need to follow the state bodies' requirements under the OML; this includes recording and posting.

**Budgets**

*School District Budget:*

- Under the Administration's proposal, the District School Board would vote on how to allocate the base budget from the State.
  - District School Board members would vote on the district's budget instead of the voters in the district.
  - The deadline for this vote should be in statute.
- Required Informational Meeting/Annual Meeting
  - The statute should set a time frame for the informational meeting(s), such as within 45 days and no less than 10 days of the budget vote.
  - VTSOS recommends a required informational meeting be held in each ward before the budget vote.

*Supplemental Budget Vote:*

- The Administration proposes allowing the District School Board to call a vote district-wide to increase local spending for special or specific items.
  - There should be a set time frame for an informational meeting before the vote. Again, VTSOS recommends informational meetings in each ward.
  - This vote has to be done before the start of the Fiscal Year.
- Because this is a multi-town district, using an Australian ballot and the Vermont Election Management System would make it faster and easier to calculate the results.
  - There should be a polling location in each town.
  - This potentially adds a 4<sup>th</sup> election on even years and a 2<sup>nd</sup> election on odd years to municipal clerks' workload.
- Voting logistics that need to be considered:

- Would a Supplemental Budget Vote be a one-time vote, or could it go to an adjusted revote?
- Is this a single vote on the District School Board's entire proposed increase or would each initiative be listed as a separate Y/N vote?
- Would this be universal-vote-by-mail?
  - If yes, this process takes at least 65 days
  - If yes, VTSOS should be responsible for the coordination of this election.
- Would this be on Town Meeting Day?
  - Issues:
    - Town meetings are not all on the same day.
    - Not all town meetings have Australian ballots at town meeting.
    - Timing issues with budget prep; will there be enough time?

### **Education Fund Allocations**

#### *School Boards:*

- School Districts will need support setting up a website, communication tools, and IT equipment for citizen access and hybrid meetings.

#### *Town Clerks:*

- The implications of this proposal will create new responsibilities for town clerks: New candidate petitions and entry, reporting of results of the November election, and Supplemental Budget Vote create a potential 4<sup>th</sup> election on even years or a 2<sup>nd</sup> election on odd years.
  - If the Supplemental Budget Vote could have an adjusted revote this would be yet another election.
- A funding structure should be created to support clerks taking on these tasks.
- Enhanced funding may need to be provided to the School District Clerk

#### *Secretary of State:*

- VTSOS's IT system will be modified to accept school board member petitions, create ballots, and report results.
- VTSOS staff time will be needed to facilitate petitions, ballot mailing, and election support for School Board elections. Additionally, VTSOS will help support Supplemental Budget Votes; particularly if VTSOS facilitates ballot mailing.
- VTSOS will provide training for clerks
- VTSOS is assessing if we need to add a position to support this work.