

## [Slides Link](#)

### Cashel- Intro

Zoe will read a joint statement, and then each of us will share written testimony on what brought us here, and why we believe students must be included in the decisions being made about the future of education in Vermont. Please ask questions any time, and Zoe and Gracie have prepared some questions to ask you at the end.

### **MISSION STATEMENT:**

"Students are the heart of education, yet their voices are often left out of the decisions that shape their learning. We believe that students deserve a seat at the table—where policies, curriculum, and school experiences are designed with them, not just for them. By fostering collaboration between students, educators, administrators and decision-makers, we can create an education system that is more inclusive, effective, and empowering for all."

### Questions:

- 1) The value of your story of experience as a student rep on a school board. Use that to lead in to how important it is that new boards continue to have student members (and aren't so small/powerful that they are hyper-politicized)

### Gracie Response:

My name is Gracie Morris and I am a Student Representative on the South Burlington School District School Board. This is my second year serving on my School Board and I'm going to tell you all a bit about why I think promoting student perspectives in the education funding process is so valuable.

The past two years have been a difficult time to be a student representative given the current fiscal crisis that we find ourselves in. For both FY25 and FY26 budgets, South Burlington had to make critical decisions regarding staffing and programming cuts. In my school, during these budget seasons, there was a feeling, shared by students and staff alike, of anxiety, distress, and confusion.

As a student representative, my task is to both bring the voice of the student body to Board meetings and to relay information from Board meetings back to students. In order to do this during budget seasons, my co-representative and I presented to high school students about education funding and specific proposed school budget cuts. Afterwards, we had complex conversations with a diverse group of students about beloved classes, programs, sports teams,

and extracurriculars. Then, with our knowledge of the current fiscal climate, my fellow student board rep and I made informed recommendations to our School Board.

Not only does having student representatives allow for School Board members to make informed decisions, but our role has proven to be impactful when communicating with community members as well. Last year, our school budget failed twice before finally passing on a third vote, and one of the main differences in the third proposed budget, besides the lower tax rate, was the student support behind it. In anticipation of the vote, my co-Student Rep and I set up a voter registration table for students and were interviewed by local news channels to spread our message publicly. We also wrote an article for our local newspaper explaining why the budget needed to be passed and helped other students in our school to do the same. And finally, South Burlington HS students engaged in a school-wide walkout, which I believe to be one of the primary factors that allowed our budget to pass. This goes to show that students are powerful in reminding taxpayers why a quality public education matters.

In a time when education funding is often talked about in terms of dollar amounts, I see it as crucial to amplify student voice at powerful tables. In some proposed education bills we've seen, School Boards seem to have the potential to become hyper-politicized due to their paid positions and small size. Including student representatives on these boards would be a crucial check on power. By allowing student perspectives to be amplified at these tables, the State will ensure that major decisions by both Board members and taxpayers are being made with the experience and opportunities of students in mind.

Cashel Response:

Transforming education will affect students more directly than any other group of people in Vermont. They deserve a say in the future of public education not only because their entire lived experiences are defined by it, but also because they know it best.

But recently I've been thinking about things with a broader scope.

As a member of my school board, I've interacted deeply with Vermont's public education system. Through that interaction and learning, I've grown to care for and value this education system

I know the same can't be true for many thousands of students in Vermont.

I see an opportunity in this education proposal and the general movement toward transformation to embed students in the process and allow them to interact with, learn from, and value our education system the same way I have.

Right now in this country, we are seeing the effects of widespread distrust of institutions.

One of the most important things that can be instilled early on in someone's life is the value of our public institutions.

By including students in this movement toward transformation, you are instilling the value of our public education in the next generation of Vermonters.

You are encouraging them to always work towards a better future, and to not trust institutions blindly, but to trust the promise of institutions, and the benefits they bring, even if there is room for improvement.

Zoe Response:

Hi, my name is Zoe Epstein, and this is my second year serving as a student representative on the Champlain Valley School District School Board. During my first year, I took a backseat in my role. As the youngest of the three representatives, I wanted to listen, learn, and ensure I fully understood the complexities of school governance before contributing my own thoughts and opinions.

This year, I've been determined to be more actively involved and find meaningful ways to amplify student voice. After attending our first budget information meeting in December 2024, I was struck by the absence of student perspectives in decision-making. What stood out even more was the district's communications plan — despite its detailed strategies for community engagement, there was no mention of student outreach. I knew something needed to change.

To address this, I collaborated closely with Superintendent Adam Bunting, Communications Manager Tyler Cohen, and a small group of students. Together, we created a presentation explaining the complexities of our district's general education fund, the impact of property taxes and the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA), and the effects of Acts 60 and 127 on statewide education funding. We also examined the specific budget reductions facing Champlain Valley Union High School (CVU) and explored how those cuts would impact students' daily lives.

We delivered the presentation to all 9th and 12th-grade students, as well as several 10th and 11th graders. Their reactions ranged from fear and confusion to disbelief and curiosity.

Witnessing those responses underscored how vital it is for students to understand the financial decisions shaping their education — and for their voices to be part of those conversations.

To capture these perspectives, we created a documentary featuring student testimonies. They shared their thoughts, reflections, and deep appreciation for our school and the education and opportunities it provides. A common theme emerged — confusion. Many students questioned why the system was so complex. Ninth graders expressed fear that they wouldn't have access to the same opportunities as those before them. Upperclassmen voiced concern for future students, worried that the remarkable programs that shaped their learning experiences could disappear. Their stories highlighted the profound impact these decisions have on our school community, making it clear why student voices must be heard.

When I first read the governor's original proposal and the H.454 bill, I was shocked by the profound lack of student voice in the decision-making process. These policies would directly impact students' educational experiences, yet the perspectives of those most affected were entirely absent. It was a stark reminder of how often young people are left out of conversations about their own education.

The changes my fellow students and I have been able to make through the platform I have on the school board wouldn't have been possible without the existence of the student representative role. Serving in this capacity has given me the opportunity to advocate for my peers, ensuring their concerns and insights are heard by district leaders. It's a role that has empowered me to bridge the gap between students and policymakers — something I now recognize as essential for creating meaningful and equitable change.

This experience has shown me the immense value of having student voices represented at the decision-making table. Student representatives offer a firsthand perspective on how policies and budgets impact learning environments, extracurricular opportunities, and overall school culture. Without that insight, boards risk making decisions that fail to address the actual needs of students. Maintaining student representation on school boards is not just beneficial — it's essential for building an education system that genuinely serves its students.

Moreover, it's crucial that school boards remain balanced and collaborative, rather than becoming hyper-politicized or dominated by a few powerful voices. When boards are small or politically driven, the risk of student perspectives being disregarded grows even higher. Student representation brings accountability and reminds board members of the human impact behind every decision.

Moving forward, I am committed to advocating for the continued presence of student members on school boards. Our experiences and insights matter, and the meaningful change we've created in my district proves just how impactful student voices can be. A truly representative school board — one that listens, collaborates, and values student input — is the key to ensuring our education system reflects the needs and aspirations of all its students.

Questions 2: Remind us of the importance of authentic student voice.

Through this process, I have learned a simple but powerful truth — students care deeply when they are given the knowledge and the platform to contribute. Time and time again, I have witnessed how informed and empowered students become when they understand the decisions that impact their education. When students see how policies and budgets shape their experiences, they don't respond with apathy — they respond with passion, insight, and a genuine desire to create positive change.

But that opportunity to engage doesn't happen by chance. It happens when students are intentionally invited into conversations, not as a symbolic gesture, but as meaningful contributors. Student voice is not just a checkbox on a stakeholder list — it is an essential perspective that brings relevance and accountability to the decisions that shape our schools. Without it, we risk making choices in a vacuum, detached from the realities of the very people those decisions affect.

In my role as a student representative, I have seen firsthand how impactful authentic student input can be. By collaborating with district leaders, developing presentations, and facilitating discussions, I've worked to ensure that students are not only informed about budget decisions but also empowered to voice their perspectives. The responses from my peers — their curiosity, their concern, and their desire to understand the complexities of school funding — reaffirm the importance of this work. Students care. They want to be part of the process. They just need the chance.

I challenge you, as changemakers and leaders in our school community, to reflect on this: How can we ensure that students play a more active role in shaping the decisions that impact them? Not just as advisors, but as essential voices in the process — where their ideas are not only heard, but valued and acted upon. This means recognizing student perspectives as credible and necessary, creating intentional opportunities for dialogue, and fostering a culture where young people feel empowered to question, contribute, and advocate for their peers.

True progress begins when student voices are not just included, but embedded into the foundation of decision-making. It happens when we move beyond performative listening and commit to collaborative leadership. It means viewing students not as passive recipients of policies, but as active participants in creating the educational experiences they deserve. Because when students are part of the process, the result is a stronger, more inclusive school community — one where every decision reflects the shared values and aspirations of those it serves.

#### Recommendations:

Gracie:

In many proposed education bills we've seen, the idea of making education standards more equitable and consistent between districts has come up time and time again.

Students have the potential to play a vital role in expanding access and promoting opportunities to their neighboring districts and therefore, increasing the quality and equity of our public schools.

A fitting example of this involved the implementation of a student-centered, discussion-based teaching approach called Harkness. Historically, Harkness has been used primarily in private schools to both teach students how to converse effectively and engage deeper in their learning.

In 2016, Harwood Union High School began to implement Harkness into their class curriculum. This curriculum begins by teaching 9th grade students "soft skills," and then progresses into full-class discussions about various topics. From there, students continue their high school classes practicing this conversation method, and by graduation, students are able to apply these skills to conversations surrounding difficult topics.

After Harwood began implementing this discussion practice into their curriculum, CVU has followed suit and also offers Harkness teaching in many classes. This fall, a student group that I'm part of at South Burlington caught wind of this teaching style and have since been advocating for it to be implemented into curriculum at South Burlington. Last month, our group was welcomed into CVU and observed one Harkness discussion and participated in another. Now, in a few weeks, we'll be presenting to the entire SBHS teaching staff during professional development about the Harkness pedagogy. Following the presentation, teachers will have the opportunity to speak with CVU students and teachers about their experience with Harkness.

In Vermont, we are lucky that great opportunities, such as Harkness, are already abundant in many of our public schools. When we talk about setting consistent education standards, we have the opportunity to share these initiatives with other districts, which would directly uplift all

students, by both providing new opportunities for some or empowering others with leadership roles when sharing about these programs.

Cashel:

Zoe:

- I think it is important that before moving forward, we have a general consensus on what the definition of education is, and who and how it is supposed to serve?
- Vermont undeniably spends a significant amount of money on education. However, the approach taken by decision-makers and the governor's proposal seems to fall short of prioritizing students, educators, and opportunities for learning. So my question to you is, is this proposal meant to be a fiscal conversation or one that is student-centered?
- Could certain costs currently classified under education be shifted to other funding sources or budget categories to alleviate the financial strain on our schools?
- If budgets continue to be something that is voted on by local communities, could removing fixed costs from the voted on number be considered?
- How could we tackle the rising cost of healthcare premiums to mitigate other issues?
- What groups within the state house do you believe would benefit most from a student perspective.

CVSD- Approximately 85 FTE Reductions over the course of the past 2 years

- 20 Million Shortfall (If proposal doesn't include special ed and transport funding) 14 Million Shortfall if it does include
- Average 16.6% last year (FY25) → 3.8% decrease (FY26)

SBSD- Approximately 46 FTE Reductions over the past 3 years

- Average 8% tax rate increase last year and this year (FY25 & FY26)

HUUSD- Approximately 30 FTE Reductions over the past 2 years

- 6 Million Shortfall

These numbers are not just figures on a spreadsheet — they represent the loss of invaluable educators, programs, and opportunities for students. Budgets have failed, resources have dwindled, and districts are running out of options. Administrators have done everything possible to be creative, to stretch limited resources, and to protect student experiences. But we are reaching a breaking point. If the proposals move forward as written, and these projected shortfalls become a reality, we fear that our schools and public education as a whole will no longer look the same.

With all three of our districts — CVSD, SBSD, and HUUSD — facing severe financial shortfalls, unaffordable property tax increases, and repeated budget failures, how can we expect a budget to be crafted that continues providing students with the same quality of education? At what point will we acknowledge that the current system is unsustainable, and what steps can be taken to ensure that Vermont's public schools remain places of opportunity, growth, and excellence for all students?