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## TESTIMONY

**Testimony To:** House Committee on Education

**Respectfully Submitted by:** Zoie Saunders, M.Ed., Secretary

**Subject:** H.454

**Date:** March 27, 2025

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### **School Construction**

The Agency appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on H.129 related to the broader education transformation proposal. The Agency recognizes the importance of school construction aid in achieving equity and quality. The current condition of school facilities across the state and historical lack of state-funded construction aid has made it challenging, if not impossible, for many districts to satisfactorily address all facilities needs. Projects ranging from basic deferred maintenance issues, to enhancing or improving efficiencies, and to renovation or consolidation to address scale, rely completely on local budget approval which varies widely across the state. School construction aid should contemplate the future of Vermont's school portfolio and will need to identify a funding source.

The legislative requirements proposed identify the work needed to support successful delivery of a well-developed school construction aid program and is consistent with AOE's contributions to the former School Construction Aid Working Group. However, to achieve the desired outcome, any School Construction Aid program must be developed and implemented in alignment with needed changes to governance, scale, and a strategic vision for education in Vermont. Consideration for eligibility requirements, absent a detailed understanding of district governance, funding, and accountability requirements feels premature. Instead, we emphasize the importance of first achieving scale in district governance and establishing a predictable budgeting process. Once scale is achieved, districts would then be responsible for completing an assessment on whether all schools are able to meet state requirements for viability (both educationally and financially), or implement changes to achieve such. As local decisions are made, districts which identify facilities- or construction-based solutions to reaching viability will likely require state construction aid to do so.

While larger system changes are pending, there is some urgency to remain consistent in the availability of Emergency Construction Aid. Current statute provides for up to a maximum reimbursable amount of \$30,000 per approved request. The proposed language indicates that Emergency Construction Aid may be awarded for a maximum amount of up to 20% of the per project maximum cost of \$100,000. This would create a maximum award amount of \$20,000 per project, which is a reduction of \$10,000 from the current reimbursable



amount. \$30,000, in current state, is not substantial for most projects that have requested and been approved for Emergency Construction Aid. The Agency would like to request clarification on whether this reduction was intentional, and whether there is intent to increase either the total maximum project threshold or percentage of reimbursable costs.

## **Section 13**

The Agency agrees with the committee's intent to create consolidated system structures to ensure a more cohesive and sustainable education system statewide. However, many of these activities may be challenging to initiate in the absence of direction on what a future state system may look like. Creating new statewide systems before governance is finalized may create additional cost and confusion.

### **Statewide Graduation Requirements**

The Agency is supportive of creating further system alignment through statewide graduation requirements. Currently, the Education Quality Standards outline the curriculum content areas in which a student must be proficient in in order to graduate, however these are "locally determined" creating wide variability across the state. The Agency is prepared to support this work in coordination with the transition.

### **Statewide School Calendar**

The Agency supports the intention of creating a statewide school calendar. However, we are concerned that the implementation of this calendar is misaligned with the consolidation of school districts as it is contemplated in H.454. Creating a calendar absent guidance on the structure of a future state system poses challenges.

### **Statewide Financial Data and Information Systems**

The current PowerSchool eFinance contract expires July 1, 2027 and the Agency is poised to align future changes to the system with governance changes. There remains some support for the theoretical concept of statewide school district systems, and there are lessons learned that should be applied to this effort.

This will involve a multi-year process that includes an inventory of existing systems, developing user requirements, evaluating the cost of implementation, administering a procurement process, and supporting a multi-year statewide adoption. Full adoption will likely occur beyond FY29 and will depend on the analysis of need and cost.

The transformation proposal includes a position to support district offices to integrate disparate data systems and will serve as the key state-district liaison.