

Hi, I'm Zoe Epstein. I'm a student representative on the CVSD school board, where I've been working to amplify student voice in education. My latest initiative is building a statewide network of student board reps. I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had in the Champlain Valley School District—from classes aligned with my future goals to clubs and sports that I love. I am excited to share my ideas with you today.

Students are the heart of education, yet their voices are often left out of the decisions that shape their learning. I 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.

Sec1 Part (6) (Page 2) Under Findings and Intent plan: H.454 (As passed out of the house reads)

12 Vermonters deserve an exceptional educational system that is stable
13 and predictable and where a student's home address does not dictate the
14 quality of education they receive. School district size and boundaries, school
15 size, and class size are all influential factors in shaping the quality of
16 instruction and overall student outcomes. The effectiveness of our schools
17 depends on teacher quality, resource availability, and the unique strengths of
18 local communities. Change in our educational system is needed. Systems are
19 made of people, so change must come carefully and thoughtfully, with
20 meaningful engagements by all Vermonters.

The intent behind this section of H.454 rightly recognizes that a student's zip code should not determine the quality of their education. It acknowledges the importance of stable systems, equitable access, and thoughtful reform. But if we are truly committed to educational equity, we must also confront the contradiction of expanding school choice policies that pull resources and students away from public schools—especially those in less affluent areas. You cannot claim to support equal opportunity while promoting systems that deepen disparities. Public education has long been a cornerstone of our democracy, built to serve every child regardless of background. If it has endured for generations as a public good, why should we turn away from it now? Real change means strengthening the public education system for all students, not creating alternatives that only serve a few.

Yes, systems are made of people, as stated in the excerpt above, but students are the heart of this system. We are the ones sitting in the classrooms, navigating the curriculum, and living the direct consequences and benefits of every policy decision. Yet, time and time again, we are left out of the rooms where those decisions are made. Right now, you have the opportunity to challenge that status quo — to break the cycle of exclusion and show that student voices are not just welcome, but essential. Including us in this decision-making process would not only strengthen the outcomes of this legislation but it would signal a powerful shift toward a more inclusive, forward-thinking education system.

When I first read the governor's proposal and H.454, I was shocked by the absence of student input, despite the sweeping changes being proposed. It was a stark reminder of how often youth perspectives are treated as an afterthought, rather than an asset. If we want meaningful change, it must be driven by those who understand the daily realities of our schools. There are places within this process where there is ample opportunity to increase student voice. I urge you to formally add a student member to the commission overseeing these reforms. Additionally, I strongly urge you to reconsider the removal of student representatives from school boards following district consolidation. Student input is not a luxury — it is a necessity. Without it, we risk building a system that fails to reflect the lived experiences, needs, and ideas of those it exists to serve.

I recently had a conversation with Bob Laird, a retired Vermont educator and Co-Director for Teaching, Learning and Research at the Vermont Math Institute. We discussed the importance of professional development and its direct reflection on students. While H.454 rightly names teacher quality as a key factor in school effectiveness, there is a notable absence of provisions that invest in ongoing professional development or support for educators. If we are going to prioritize teacher quality in theory, we must also back that priority with resources in practice. An investment in teachers is an investment in student success, and reform efforts that overlook that connection risk falling short of their goals. If we make every teacher the best they can be and provide them with opportunities to learn and grow, we are, in turn, benefiting all students. A well-supported, continually improving teaching force directly translates into stronger educational experiences and outcomes for everyone in the classroom.

In conclusion, the future of Vermont's education system depends on the meaningful and inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, especially students. If we are truly committed to ensuring that every student receives a high-quality education, we must challenge outdated systems, confront contradictions in policy, and make thoughtful investments in our educators. By fostering collaboration between students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers, we can create an education system that reflects the needs, aspirations, and lived experiences of those it serves. Strengthening the public education system, supporting teacher development, and ensuring student voice at the decision-making table are all essential components of achieving real, lasting change. It's time to move beyond performative measures and embrace a future where all voices, especially those of students, are heard and valued in shaping the education we all deserve.

On a final note, I urge you all to reflect on and discuss what the true meaning of education is, who it serves, and why it exists. Please carry that with you in all the decisions you make moving forward. You have the opportunity to improve opportunities for Vermont students please make every choice with us in mind.