

My name is Cashel Higgins, and I'm a senior at Harwood Union High School. I'm a second-year student representative on the Harwood Union Unified School District School Board,

and I'm a board member of the Vermont Learners Association, which is a newly formed group made up of student school board representatives from across the state.

I also worked in this building last year, so I'm glad to be back. Thank you for having me. My testimony today is a personal account, but it will also be representative of the VLA's thoughts on this bill.

I want to answer your questions so stop me whenever.

Talk about what I do on my school board

There are four student representatives on my board: two juniors and two seniors
We have a non-binding vote, so it's really just up to board members if they want to listen to us
But our board listens to us, and we engage in discussions often

Being on this board, I've voted for two budgets.

Have cut

- 6.5m dollars in spending
- 50 teachers.
- blocks of our public preschool program
- language classes for elementary schoolers
- nurses
- We've increased class sizes
- have had to put off reducing any of our almost 90 million dollars of deferred maintenance.

But even through these circumstances, I've taken immense value away from being on a school board. I've been able to engage deeply with Vermont's education system and governance, funding mechanisms, and the reasons we do things the way we do. I've interacted with education in Vermont in a way few other high school students have had the opportunity to. Because of this experience, I've developed pride in our mission to provide every student in this state with a more than adequate educational experience. I've been grateful to share the weight of these difficult decisions with my board, and virtually every board across the state is making right now. The thoughts and feelings I have from serving have driven me to this building many times, to canvassing for school budget votes in my district, and generally being an active and informed member of the greater Vermont community.

Talk about VLA Position

The VLA believes the more democracy, the better. School boards have two constituencies, and right now only one of them is represented on the board. Taxpayers have a deservedly large say when it comes to school funding and being able to elect board representatives, but students are directly impacted by the decisions a school board makes every day for the first eighteen years of their lives.

This bill would add Vermont to the elite coterie of states, New Hampshire, New York, and Massachusetts, which require school boards to have student representatives.

Students bring immense value to the boards they serve. They inform policy and board discussions through their everyday lived experiences, they report back on policy implementation, and they engage in outreach to the student body to help pass budgets. As part of my time on the board, I organized a school-wide dialogue to gather student priorities for a bond the board was working on. When students serve a board, they serve themselves as well.

This legislation is an opportunity to instill the importance of our education system and the need for its reform in countless students across Vermont, and to give them the ability to actively pursue its betterment through their voting power and stature in their communities as representatives. I see this bill is part of our movement towards education reform and creating democratic systems that truly serve those they mean to represent. I strongly support its passage.