

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee
FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Chair, Commission on the Future of VT Education)
TOPIC: Commission Update
DATE: February 19, 2025

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide regular updates to the Committee regarding the work of the Commission, so that we are able to remain present and engaged as you conduct your work.

Commission Cadence & Focus

The last time I provided an update, I let you know that the Steering Group would be recommending a path forward for the Commission in order to be most useful to the legislature. Toward that end, the Commission decided to engage in a high-level identification of policy considerations under each of the three areas: Governance, Funding and Quality. The Commission will develop questions, considerations and recommendations for the legislature. This also allows the Commission to respond to active policy proposals as well as continue to move forward on the long-term charge identified in Act 183.

In addition, the Steering Group acknowledged that it may be helpful for the legislature if we as a body recommended revisions to our charge that will best support our work, and yours. At minimum, we think it is important to communicate how the Commission intends to prioritize its work. We will maintain a cadence of reporting to the legislature after each meeting. This may eventually result in “issue briefs” or similar communications, up to and including recommendations.

Summary of February 17th Meeting

In keeping with our three policy areas and focusing on Funding, Dr. Tammy Kolbe was invited to share a similar presentation with the Commission that your committee saw about Foundation Formula Considerations. Our goal was to ground our discussion in an identified set of data and then discuss. Although at the last minute Dr. Kolbe was not able to join us, the Commission did engage in a useful discussion, surfacing a number of considerations and reactions specific to the idea of a foundation formula. This conversation very quickly evolved into a substantive and important discussion about the Administration’s proposal writ large as well as our role as a Commission. I believe it is important for your Committee to be aware of the themes that grew out of this discussion. Below is a summary of the discussion. I’ll close with the Commission’s next steps.

Note: Because of the state holiday, nine members of the Commission were present: Meagan Roy, Jennifer Deck-Samuels, John Castle, Jay Nichols, Jeff Fannon, Elizabeth Jennings, Mike Leichter, Peter Conlon, Oliver Olsen (for part of the meeting).

Foundation Formula Considerations

This agenda topic was meant to surface questions, concerns and/or considerations for the legislature as it considers the merits of a transition to a foundation formula. Members reflected on Dr. Kolbe’s earlier legislative presentations as well as Administration testimony and their own work. The following are themes that emerged from the discussion:

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- **There is concern about the sufficiency of the base amount included in the Administration’s proposal.** In considering the merits of a foundation formula, it is clear that the most important question to answer before deciding if it is a good idea is the calculation of the base amount. An inadequate base funding amount does not provide the resources needed for schools to meet the needs of students (see also comments below, under Quality).
 - The proposal takes almost \$200 million out of Vermont’s education system. Commission members are clear in their belief that this magnitude of reductions would impact students.
 - Individual districts who operate at or close to scale and historically spent at *or below* statewide per pupil spending (likely due to that scale) have modeled the new formula and would face significant reductions. Commission members questioned why we would contemplate a model where districts operating at the preferred scale would be penalized.
- **There is concern about the sole reliance on the “evidence-based model” to derive the base in the Administration’s proposal.** There are actually three methods for developing a base model, and the most effective states triangulate information from all three before setting the base amount of funding. If it is considering the merits of a foundation formula, Commission members suggest the legislature should utilize not only the evidence-based model cited by the Agency’s consultants, but Professional Judgement Panels and Education Cost Functions (See [Design Considerations for Establishing a Foundation Formula](#), Dr. Tammy Koble, January 30 2025)
- **Any foundation formula needs to include a mechanism for the formula to be adjusted in the future.** Commission members noted that foundation formulas are at risk of future decreases, especially during financially challenging times for states. An “inflater” must be included in the formula to prevent future reductions in the base amount of funding.

Cost Drivers

Commission members discussed that any proposal to adjust funding (or governance) will not result in change unless overall cost drivers are also addressed. Instead, a reduction of education funding will simply impact students. Some cost drivers identified include healthcare, facilities, tuition, mental health services and others.

Governance

Commission members noted that it is difficult to adequately assess a funding model that is built on a governance structure that does not exist yet, which prompted discussion about the governance portion of the Administration’s proposal. The following themes emerged from this discussion:

- **Any change to governance (regardless of the number of districts) would need to occur prior to the funding formula shift.** Because the formula modeled in the Administration’s proposal is based on the five-district structure, it relies significantly on savings that can only

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occur in that structure. Commission members noted that decreasing funding before making changes to scale results only in a significant decrease in funding to students.

- **The savings reflected in the Administration's proposal are derived from a governance structure that does not exist yet.** Commission members discussed the amount of upheaval and disruption to the system that would occur if the Administration's governance proposal were implemented and whether that scale of change is worth the tax impact. Members were concerned about the “upending” of our educational system with little concrete information to suggest better quality - and whether that upheaval would be worth the tax savings.
- **The magnitude of change involved in this proposal requires more time and contemplation to determine the merits - and even more time for implementation.** Commission members shared their belief that the timeline proposed by the Administration would be insufficient. They noted that there is not sufficient capacity within the Agency to support such change. The Commission discussed Act 173 as an example of implementation challenges - that legislation arguably addressed only one component of our education system and yet is not fully realized even now, seven years after passage.

Choice

Commission members noted that it was impossible to separate the expansion of school choice in the Administration’s plan from the discussion of the funding formula and governance structure. There was concern raised about this expansion taking more students out of the public education system at a time when schools are already experiencing enrollment decline, and that expansion of choice risks further destabilization of the public education system. There remain significant equity concerns about who accesses school choice and who does not.

Quality of Education

There was discussion about the impact of this proposal on the quality of instruction provided to students. Members acknowledge that the Administration states their proposal results in improved quality. However, it was discussed that even if a massive governance shift occurred as proposed, that would not necessarily change the delivery of education at the local level. Thus, Commission members discussed their concern that the proposal would simply reduce funding with no guarantee of increased quality. Specifically:

- **Any discussion of a foundation formula must be grounded in the extent to which it provides the resources necessary for a school to implement quality instructional practices.** The Commission noted that the proposal as outlined does not rely on research about evidence-based *instructional* practices. Act 173, a law designed to require schools to implement evidence-based MTSS practices, would not be sufficiently funded in the proposed formula. This would be an important reason for Professional Judgement Panels to be part of developing any sort of base amount.

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School Construction

Members discussed that the current proposal does not address the facilities needs that are well-articulated in the legislature's own study of facilities. Facilities needs are not only a cost driver - they are intricately connected to any change in delivery model that could occur as part of the plan. Several members shared examples of districts that are contemplating the merging of smaller schools, but who can't make those changes without facilities renovations. Commission members believe that the basic infrastructure needs of our system cannot be separated from any proposal.

Taking a Position on the Proposal Overall

As Commission members engaged in the discussions outlined above, several members voiced that the Commission should consider taking a position as a Commission about the merits of the Administration's proposal - specifically, a position against the proposal. The group ultimately determined that this should not be done in Monday's meeting because several members were missing - including, notably, representatives of the Administration. Commission members felt it was important to share the following:

- **The Commission was not involved in the development of the Administration's proposal.** Members pointed out that the Administration developed and communicated this plan outside the legislatively-created Commission that was created to do just that: develop recommendations for changes to Vermont's education system. Slides describing the Administration's plan were emailed to the group after they had been presented to the legislature. Commission members maintain that they should have been involved in the development from the beginning, providing the kind of deep engagement that the legislature intended when it convened the Commission.
- **The rollout of the proposal lacks critical detail, making it difficult to adequately engage in responding to and providing feedback.** Commission members voiced frustration with the rollout of the proposal. The Commission has found it challenging to deliver on its duty to raise issues, concerns and pose alternatives. Members expressed feeling "stuck" - unsure whether they need to provide alternative recommendations because they are waiting to learn more. This parallel design track has not been productive, and is certainly not representative of the collaboration that the Administration speaks about.
- **The message stated and implied in the Administration's proposal that Vermont needs a complete rebuild of the entire system serves to further degrade our public education system.** Commission members voiced significant concern about messaging that faults Vermont educators, leaders, school boards and communities for the challenges we face today. Thoughtful questions are described as "defending the status quo" and those who ask those questions described as "misinformed." This denigration further erodes the public education system.

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Next Steps/Recommendations

During its discussion, Commission members made clear that they believe there are steps we can take to improve quality, funding and governance and improve the experience (and outcomes) for Vermont students. Commission members do not wish to defend and maintain the status quo.

The Commission identified the following next steps:

- Continue to analyze policy considerations and recommendations: The Commission will work within the areas of governance, funding and quality to frame the issues, generate questions and offer alternative recommendations. Given that the first policy area identified in the law is Governance, our next meeting will focus on generating policy considerations in this area. Specifically, we will discuss the following questions:
 - To what extent does the creation of scale through governance consolidation result in increased opportunity and improved instruction for students? To what extent can such changes bend the cost curve?
 - What are we trying to achieve with changes to governance (financial; quality)?
 - What in our current structures get in the way?
- Engage in a discussion about revisions to our charge: The Commission may provide recommendations to the general assembly for suggested revisions to our charge and/or timeline. We also welcome any insight you would like to offer us to inform this discussion. In particular, we welcome any specific questions or issues your committee would like us to address.
- Continued community engagement: Afton Partners will engage with the Communication & Engagement Subcommittee to propose a revised engagement plan that targets the specific groups identified in the law as well as additional voices based on the considerations being discussed. Engagement opportunities will vary in type (focus groups, individual engagement, open sessions, etc) based on the specific input desired. Afton Partners will present the draft, revised engagement plan as part of the Commission's March 17 meeting.