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To: House Education Committee
From: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director and General Counsel, VSBA
Re: Governor's Education Transformation Proposal: Governance
Date: February 13, 2025

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to join the Committee today to discuss scale and governance.

I am joined today by Dr. Phil Gore who is currently the Chief Learning Officer for the Idaho School Boards Association. Prior to moving to Idaho, Dr. Gore served as the Director of Board Services for the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA). He has also served as a Division Director for the Texas Association of School Boards and worked for the National School Boards Association and the Washington State School Directors Association. Dr. Gore is the author of "Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach."

Dr. Gore's work in Vermont, combined with his work in other states and nationally, provides him with important perspectives to share with the Committee on scale and governance.

I'll start with a general overview of district sizes and school board sizes in the United States.

District Size and Organization by State

There are more than 13,000 geographically defined school districts in the United States. Most current school districts are for K-12 education, but some are elementary or secondary only. This number–13,000—does not include the charter schools in the United States. It also does not include private and religious schools.

A 2022 Ballotpedia analysis of school districts in the United States found that every state has at least one school district—with most states having more than 100 districts. States with the fewest number of districts are Delaware with 19, Nevada with 20, and Maryland with 24. States with the highest

number of districts are Texas with 1,022, California with 977 and Illinois with 853. It's important to note that these numbers may have changed slightly in the last three years. The landscape of school districts is constantly in flux asnew districts are created and existing districts are merged or eliminated over time.

<u>School Board Size</u>

In terms of school board size, the range of 5 to 13 members per board is fairly typical across the United States. (Ballotpedia)

Surveys conducted in 2018 by the National School Boards Association showed that in 2010, boards with 5 seats were most common. Eight years later, in 2018, the typical school board contained 7 individuals.

It's important to note that while this 5-13 range is fairly typical across the US., <u>there is no universally accepted ideal size</u> for a school board. The effectiveness of a board depends on various factors beyond just the number of members. Factors such as board member backgrounds, adherence to best practices, small group dynamics, and the ability to collaborate with the superintendent—these all play crucial roles in a board's impact on district performance.

This brings us to district performance, specifically student achievement, and whether and how a board has an impact on it.

To jump ahead to the conclusion, the answer is <u>yes</u>. Research concludes that the way school boards govern does indeed affect district-level performance. How do we know this?

<u>The Iowa Lighthouse Study</u>
One of the richest datasets available is the Lighthouse Study conducted by the Iowa Association of School Boards. The IASB conducted ongoing research on effective school boards and their role in advancing student achievement. The studies identified characteristics of school boards of districts with higher levels of student achievement and how they may affect their districts' performance. Their conclusion: School board actions are a key part of a "culture of improvement," and school boards can create conditions that promote student learning

<u>Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards</u>
The Center of Public Education, the research arm of the National School Boards Association, conducted a meta-analysis of ten studies and reports on school board leadership, including several based on the Iowa Lighthouse Study. The result is a report entitled: "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards." One of the most reputable research-informed lists of attributes of effective school boards, the Eight Characteristics is a structure commonly referenced on the national level and when researchers are studying school boards.

One of these characteristics of an effective school board is a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

The Lighthouse Study is particularly relevant in conveying this. The research found that in high-achieving districts, board members maintained <u>strong and open lines of communication</u> with the superintendent, staff, and one another. They gathered information from multiple sources—including the superintendent, curriculum directors, principals, teachers, and external experts. While the superintendent played a central role in sharing information, they were not the sole source. Furthermore, findings and research were consistently shared among all board members, ensuring that decision-making was well-informed.

In contrast, board members in low-achieving districts expressed concerns about uneven access to information. Some members reported feeling excluded from key discussions, leading to a fragmented understanding of district priorities.

High-achieving districts also demonstrated a strong commitment to <u>community engagement</u>. Their board members could provide specific examples of outreach efforts and actively promoted involvement. Staff in these districts described the boards as supportive and respectful, noting that board members listened to their concerns and valued their input. One key strategy was to hold post-board meetings to brief teachers and administrators on policy decisions.

By comparison, school boards in lower-performing districts frequently cited challenges in communication and outreach. They often attributed low parent involvement to a lack of interest, yet they could identify only limited efforts to foster engagement. Many board members expressed frustration with the community's lack of participation but believed there was little they could do to change it. Within the district, staff members from these lower-performing schools often reported little to no interaction with their board members.

I'm going to pause now and ask Dr. Gore to provide any comments he has on The Lighthouse Study and specifically on the ability of 25 school board members serving the entire state of Vermont to achieve the characteristic I spoke about earlier: collaborative relationship with staff and the community and a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

<u>Comments from Dr. Phil Gore</u>

Thank you, Sue. It is an honor to join you and the Vermont House Education Committee today. You have shared some of the most salient research to consider in relation to public school governance. I had the privilege of participating in the project during Phases Two and Three. The principal investigator, Dr. Mary Delagardelle was both a school board member in one district and a principal in another at the time she began that research. Mary was adamantly committed to the importance of community engagement but could not prove the relationship with student achievement statistically. Since her passing, other researchers including Ivan Lorentzen and Bill McCaw have been able to show a statistical relationship between school boards engaging their

community and the likelihood that student achievement is improving overall, while at the same time achievement gaps are closing.

Importantly, this is not the type of community engagement of parents, caregivers, and families participating in the schools. This is community engagement–students, staff, and families–engaging with the board in governance. By this we mean, the board establishing values, vision, and goals collaboratively with the greater community. When the community participates in these governance activities, together with the board, student achievement and gaps in achievement are more likely to be improving.

Vermont's long tradition of local governance of its public schools is highly more likely to support improved student outcomes than more remote regionalized or centralized governance of Vermont public schools. The closer governance is to schools and students, the more likely that governance is representing the vision and values that the local community has for its schools.

Arguably, there is room for balance between community representation and efficiencies of scale. It is hard to know what the ideal number of school districts would be for Vermont. Consideration needs to be given to economies of scale, local and regional differences of both expectations and resources, and sharing of best practices across the state. While there is always room for improvement, state lawmakers and public education providers want to carefully explore and balance any mandated changes in governance structures. While it may be difficult to stipulate what the ideal number of school districts would be for Vermont, that number is much larger than five. Back to you, Sue.

School Advisory Committees/Councils

Now turning our attention to the creation of a local School Advisory Committee (SAC) for every school, part of the Governor's proposal to maintain a degree of local control in the five districts.

The concept of School Advisory Committees or Councils is not new. Dr. Gore will speak to their history and effectiveness in a few minutes.

First, I would like to take an example from the School District of Philadelphia. In June 2016, the School District of Philadelphia adopted a policy to create "School Advisory Councils", which are peer elected, collaborative teams composed of family members (largest group), the school principal, teachers or other school based staff, students (for schools with grades 7 – 12), and community members. The policy was designed with the intent of significantly increasing the involvement of families and the community in the educational process and making the SACs a catalyst for change in the district's schools.

However, over the past several years, the SACs in Philadelphia have struggled with their mission to be effective agents of change in support of student achievement. These challenges stem from a lack of cohesive policies, procedures and practices related to their operations and the difficulty of recruiting family members to join the SAC, resulting in unfilled seats.

It is worth noting that this new structure requires additional resources. For instance, at the central office–Philadelphia has a "School District Office of Family and Community Engagement" to support the work of the SACS. It also requires additional resources at the school building level and demands significant time from the principal who is required to be a member of the SAC. And as the school leader, they are responsible for ensuring the committee's creation (through application or election) and fulfilling a list of duties related to the functioning of the SAC throughout the year.

Other questions and issues related to SAC that would need to be addressed are:

- Bylaws to define the size of the SAC, roles of officers, how officers are chosen, etc.
- Who can be a part of the SAC?
- How are members chosen? If by an application process (timing and criteria). If by election who runs it and what are the procedures? Are elections school and/or community-wide or are members selected by their constituency group (e.g. parents, staff, students)?
- What is the term length?
- What number constitutes a quorum?
- Who determines: the agenda for each meeting, a conflict of interest procedure, public comment parameters, operation policies and procedures?
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities of SAC members: the principal, the parents/family members, school staff, students, community members.
- What happens if a school can't stand-up a functioning SAC? Are there consequences? Who's accountable?
- Are SAC meetings subject to Open Meeting Law and, if so, which requirements apply?

An overarching question to all of this is: how would the chain of authority and accountability that is so clear right now in our educational governance system in Vermont be affected by this new structure? In today's system authority flows from the community, specifically, the residents or voters, to the board to ensure the district is well run. The board delegates authority to the Superintendent, the CEO of the district, who in turn delegates it to their administrative team, and it continues on from there to staff. Accountability flows in the opposite direction from staff back up through the admin team, superintendent, board and community. Where would the SAC fit in this chain of authority and accountability?

Before I move on to the VSBA's response to the Vermont Superintendents Associations' policy brief, I will pause to see if Dr. Gore has any comments related to the history and effectiveness of SACs. There are no written comments from Dr. Gore on this topic.

Instructional Scale and Governance (VSBA Response to VSA Policy Brief)

The VSBA Board met last night and most of the meeting was dedicated to the Governor's Education Transformation Proposal. As part of that deliberation, the Board reviewed VSA's policy brief on instructional scale. After a healthy and respectful debate on the recommendations in the VSA policy brief, the Board was generally supportive of the recommendations in the brief as the framework for a bill addressing scale at the district, school and class size level.

In relation to scale at the district level, Board discussion indicated that the ideal number of school districts in Vermont lies somewhere between the current number of 119 and the Governor's proposal of 5. Consistent with the VSBA Legislative Platform, they would like to see data and modeling for the VSA recommendations. They appreciate that the VSA recommendations work within a structure that already exists and preserve some level of local control without uprooting the entire system.

To conclude our comments on the VSA policy brief, the VSBA could support the policy levers addressed in the brief as the basis for a bill with the understanding that we believe there is more work that needs to be done to flesh out the exceptions for infrastructure constraints and geographical necessity.

Conclusion

Public education is the core of our strong communities and is critically important for a healthy democracy. Given the current national climate, it is more important than ever to support our public schools by funding them in a sustainable way. This will involve hard choices to achieve efficiency and scale. VSBA is ready to contribute constructively to make those choices in the Vermont context.

Resources:

Analysis of school district and board member characteristics, Ballotpedia, 2022 [Ballotpedia is the digital encyclopedia of American politics, and the nation's premier resource for unbiased information on elections, politics, and policy. Ballotpedia is a 501(c)3 charitable nonprofit organization and is not affiliated with any campaigns or candidates for office.]

Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards, Chuck Devarics and Eileen O'Brien, Center for Public Education, National School Boards Association, 2011.

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National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Retrieved Online, January 4, 2025 at: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/DistrictBoundaries.

School Advisory Council FAQs, The School District of Philadelphia Office of Family and Community Engagement,

Today's School Boards & Their Priorities for Tomorrow 2018 Survey conducted by the National School Boards Association in partnership with K-12 Insight, 2018.