

Date: February 6, 2025

To: House Ways & Means & House Education Committees

From: Amy Minor, President, Vermont Superintendents Association
Chelsea Myers, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Re: Education Funding Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on education finance reform.

The Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) believes that any meaningful education reform must be grounded in the principles of equity, quality, and efficiency—values that are essential to ensuring success for all students. While superintendents recognize the need for changes to strengthen our education system, we must address the underlying cost drivers contributing to rising costs – healthcare, mental health, infrastructure, declining enrollments, and more.

Large-scale reform must be carefully sequenced. Changing the funding system without simultaneously addressing the delivery system could create unintended consequences that undermine educational quality. A well-planned, thoughtful approach is critical to ensuring positive outcomes for Vermont’s students.

A comprehensive approach to education reform requires first determining the kind of education system we aim to achieve and then ensuring it is properly funded. Simply reducing funding without adjusting the delivery system risks negatively impacting students. Superintendents are open to discussing a foundation funding formula, recognizing that the current weighted per-pupil spending range of \$10,000–\$18,000 is inequitable. However, we have concerns about discussions of models that assume a shift toward a delivery system that may not serve students, educators, and communities effectively. Specifically, we would like to highlight key considerations regarding district size and staffing assumptions.

District Size

While Vermont must continue to explore ways to improve efficiency, including reducing the number of districts, we have questions about the rationale behind using the existing superintendent regional meeting structure as the basis for the proposed five-district model. These regions were established by superintendents for the purpose of monthly meetings, not as a framework for an optimal statewide education system.

Last week, we provided the House Education Committee with research and Vermont-specific context regarding instructional scale. The Agency of Education has stated that their funding proposal is contingent on the five-district model and, subsequently, their projected cost savings. We have important questions about why this particular structure was chosen. Could the model be adjusted to account for other governance structures? How will these five district offices be

staffed and structured, and what cost savings does this represent, if any? What evidence supports this model in terms of educational quality and efficiency?

Some research suggests that the optimal district size for balancing cost efficiency and educational quality falls within the range of 2,000 to 4,000 students. The proposed five-district model could create districts significantly larger than this, raising concerns about diseconomies of scale. By comparison, the Picus & Odden report models based on a district size of 3,900 students. It is important to ensure that any restructuring enhances efficiency and student outcomes.

While district scale is undoubtedly part of the equation, it is not nearly representative of the full scope of the cost drivers that Vermont is facing.

Any talk to “right-size” the delivery system should ask the questions, “What are the benefits to students, and what are we risking for Vermont’s communities?”

[Pass to Amy Minor for staffing.]

Staffing and System Assumptions

The Picus and Odden (2024) report provides a framework for adequacy based on staffing models, but it does not fully reflect Vermont’s vision for education as outlined in our revised Education Quality Standards and existing laws, such as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Policymakers should be cautious about adopting a formula that is not aligned with Vermont’s current educational landscape or long-term goals. Additionally, ensuring adequate funding that remains stable through economic and political fluctuations is a key concern for superintendents.

We need to be open to other models that account for how Vermonters define a high-quality education system. The current staffing tables used to define the base do not account for recommended staffing levels for all department areas, and some areas need further discussion.

For example, school counselors, social workers, and mental health providers are all grouped together. To meet the recommended staffing levels on the chart, I would need to make reductions in critical staffing that support students in need. We know that the mental health needs of students are critical to the success of learning, and stripping schools of the supports they have built will harm kids.

Will the \$13,200 be enough to include existing music, drama, art, and athletic afterschool programs? We hear that number has been baked in, but we need to be sure. Have we included costs for instruments, set design, costumes, uniforms, athletic facilities, sports equipment, the cost of officials, coaches, site administration at games and events, and administrative oversight? The realities of what we currently provide for our students cannot be oversimplified.

For a high school of 600 students, it is recommended to have one principal and one assistant principal. My feedback to you is that, especially in a system reliant on fewer central office staff as proposed, this administrative building support is insufficient and will decrease the quality of the experience for students, families, and employees. Building administrators are responsible for setting the tone to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for all stakeholders. Administration and support staff oversee student management, employee supervision and evaluation, professional development planning, attendance oversight, student discipline, creating and implementing the school's continuous improvement plan for accountability, managing school safety plans, behavior threat assessments, investigating hazing, harassment, bullying, managing the complicated Title IX process and so much more. HHB and Title IX investigations can be lengthy and time-consuming. Who will oversee special educators and IEP compliance? I could speak at length about the day-to-day requirements and job demands of a building-level administrator. Large buildings will need more administrative infrastructure to successfully execute all of the legal requirements that are required of schools. If we downsize these positions, who will take on the responsibilities?

Conclusion

We encourage these two committees to continue working together to align education policy with funding policy. As Dr. Tammy Kolbe recently testified, "How will you define and measure equal opportunity or educational adequacy?" This is a fundamental question that must be answered before moving forward. At this stage, we do not believe the current proposal fully accounts for what Vermont strives for in providing equitable and high-quality education for all students. We urge the committees to explore alternative scenarios that consider various perspectives on both the current delivery model and the future direction of the education system.

We appreciate the opportunity to engage in this important discussion and look forward to working collaboratively to develop a funding model that supports Vermont's students, educators, and communities.