
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Appropriations

Respectfully Submitted by: Zoie W. Saunders, M.Ed., Secretary

Subject: H.493, an act relating to making appropriations in support of government

Date: May 6, 2025

Purpose

Thank you to the Senate Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on important sections of H.493, an act relating to making appropriations in support of government. This proposal directly responds to requests by the General Assembly and the field to build capacity in the Agency of Education to enhance statewide support.

Education Transformation Budget Request

The Agency opposes deferring this appropriation, as doing so would delay critical support to school districts during a key transition period. The requirement to develop a transition plan is duplicative of provisions already included in H.454 and would further delay the delivery of necessary services. This request has been carefully refined to align with the Agency's priorities and build capacity to support district operations and school quality. The Agency proposes establishing an Education Transformation Transition Support Team, led by an Agency team leader and supported by consultants funded in the Governor's FY26 budget, to provide immediate and sustained, targeted assistance. This request utilizes contracted consultants for a targeted period to build up Agency capacity and to help the state manage through a time of significant change.

Position 1: Business Operations Support Specialist

This position will be tasked with supporting district offices to integrate disparate accounting, HR and other back office functions. They will work in the field to convene district teams, evaluate current systems and practices and, with the support of the consultant(s) described below, develop new district budgeting, hiring and back office functions. The Business Operations Support Specialist will surface resource and training needs to other Agency teams, and will play a key role in coordinating state and district priorities should the state move towards statewide data systems. This position will be required to have experience in district business offices and, in future state, will serve as the Agency's point of contact to support districts to achieve proficiency in District Quality Standards related to Business Operations.

Position 2: Data Integration Support Specialist



This position will work closely with the Business Operations Support Specialist to support district offices to integrate disparate data systems, and, if needed, will serve as the key state-district liaison should the state require single statewide data systems. Similar to its counterpart in Business Operations, this position will convene inter-district teams to evaluate existing systems and develop plans to integrate. This position will be required to have experience in district data management and state and federal reporting requirements.

Position 3: Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist

This position will coordinate work between districts and with Agency teams to support the integration and alignment of curriculum, proficiency-based grading practices, local assessment, graduation requirements, educator evaluation, high-quality instructional materials, master scheduling, and other high leverage education quality standards. This position will coordinate closely with Agency teams to ensure alignment with state accountability and quality frameworks and with the consultant(s) in the Academic Transformation section below. They will also surface resource and training needs to other Agency teams and ensure their timely delivery to their partners in the field.

Position 4: Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist

This position will work closely with the Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist to support inter-district alignment focused on best practices in teaching and learning to ensure that educators and students experience minimal disruption during the transition period. They will coordinate with Agency teams to identify areas of need related to professional development, evidence-based practices and use of continuous improvement plans to drive student success and support teacher retention. They will work with building and district leaders to build MTSS systems, with a special focus on improving delivery of special education services.

Position 5: School Facilities Field Support Specialist

This position will convene inter-district teams to evaluate facilities. Using facilities condition data, enrollment trends, feeding and transportation patterns, and other local considerations, the School Facilities Field Support Specialist will support districts in master planning of their school portfolio under the new proposed districts. This position will coordinate with the School Facilities Program Manager and other Agency staff to ensure that districts are proficient in District Quality Standards in the future state.

Contracted Services

None of these requests represent work that is within the job duties of any existing Agency staff. These are one-time requests to support a transition and do not represent permanent work that would be undertaken by Agency staff. However, we will structure these contracted resources explicitly to build capacity of the Agency to support the new districts in ensuring equity, quality, and sustainability beyond the transitional period.

Financial Transformation and Budgeting Support

This resource(s) will work directly with the Business Operations Support Coordinator and Data Integration Support Specialist to support districts in aligning their accounting systems and budgeting practices for the future state, while offering timely support to districts who may need accelerated transition support due to systemic and operational challenges. The goal of this request is to ensure that existing districts can maintain their operations and avoid disruption, while providing targeted, on the ground support to integrate disparate systems and budgeting approaches through FY 27 and into FY 28.

The Agency requests additional resources to provide critical support through the proposed transition period from FY 26-FY 28. This support will include timely modeling and adjustments as policy decisions are made, analysis of existing systems to measure viability and provide targeted and accelerated support to school systems during transition, and intensive budgeting support for LEAs in FY 27 and FY 28 as the state moves to a foundation formula.

FY26 Focus

- Model financial impact of FY27 state foundation grant and develop criteria to evaluate the need for adjusted funding based on special circumstances
- Evaluate the financial and operational viability of forming districts and develop a warning system to identify districts for accelerated intervention (early consolidation) to ensure continuity of educational delivery
- Provide targeted training and budget support to achieve short-term cost containment strategies in FY27 aligned to legislation
- Develop budget tools that support scenario planning within defined state budgeting parameters and education quality requirements
- Provide extensive training and on-the-ground support to support 119 districts during the transition period
- Develop budget dashboards and tools to support strategic budgeting and accountability to statewide financial and equity goals

Education Quality and Accountability: Academic Transformation

This resource(s) will directly support the work of the Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist and Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist and other AOE teams towards two critical goals:

1. Ensure that districts have timely, on the ground, support as they begin to align disparate curricula and instructional materials, proficiency-based grading approaches, graduation requirements, approaches to teaching and other activities to ensure that during the transition period teaching and learning is not disrupted and will result in stronger, more cohesive districts in future state.
2. Build alignment within the Agency of Education between quality standards, accountability frameworks, evidence-based approaches to learning and teaching, and systems of support for districts with the goal of expanding Agency capacity

to drive continuous improvement and improve student outcomes across the state.

The Agency requests additional resources to engage in a comprehensive review and strengthening of the state's accountability framework, as well as to support the Agency's development of a strategic plan that will better support schools and districts into the future. The education transformation could be disruptive to teaching and learning, putting our state at risk for a downturn in academic performance and other measures of student success. The Agency needs to provide strong leadership and direction to ensure high-quality instruction during the transition and to build a foundation for educational excellence in the future. Our education system has significant vulnerabilities related to academic quality, and the U.S. Department of Education has identified several findings during their recent monitoring visit related to teacher equity, statewide graduation requirements, continuous improvement, special education monitoring, parent engagement, and other mission critical process improvements. Lastly, the Agency needs to prepare the field for the transition to the new districts/boards by providing clear direction on academic standards and tools/systems to support high quality academic performance, while ensuring high quality instruction during the transition. All of this work will be conducted under the direction of the Chief Academic Officer.

FY26 Focus

- Develop an early warning system to proactively identify schools requiring additional academic intervention and continuous improvement support
- Design tools and resources to support data-driven instruction and curriculum alignment across districts
- Redesign the Agency's special education monitoring approach and provide targeted support to address Vermont's "needs assistance" status under the direction of the Chief Academic Officer
- Evaluate data collection timelines and validation processes in alignment with national best practices to ensure compliance with federal guidelines and to improve data reporting
- Provide targeted, on-the-ground school improvement planning and support to address vulnerabilities and equip schools and districts with the tools and resources to promote high-quality instruction during a volatile year
- Design a teacher equity data monitoring system to ensure all students have access to high-quality teachers
- Complete an inventory of district curricula, proficiency-based grading approaches, and other elements of accountability, assessment, learning and teaching to support Agency and district staff in building alignment across existing districts.

School Board Support and Transformation

The Agency requests additional resources to support existing school boards and new school boards through the transition process to ensure that the new boards have the

training that they need to reduce disruption to teaching and learning throughout the education transformation, and to engage in strategic planning through the use of data to establish policies that meet state and federal requirements, while driving towards equity, quality and sustainability.

FY26 Focus

- Train existing boards on their redefined roles and responsibilities during the transition period and provide resources and tools to support close out activities and oversight of educational quality during a disruptive time
- Develop curriculum and training for new boards in alignment with the district quality standards with consideration to the unique challenges of each new district (will continue into FY 27 and FY 28)

Adult Education and Literacy

The Agency is seeking clarification from the legislature on section pertaining to the funding and administration of Adult Education and Literacy programs. The Agency of Education has a clear mandate to provide oversight of Adult Education and Literacy programs based on both statutory authority and administrative responsibilities. The Agency also has existing staff with expertise in federal grant compliance, data reporting, and program evaluation, which is critical to meeting the rigorous requirements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This institutional knowledge and administrative capacity make the Agency best positioned to ensure that funds are distributed equitably, programs are held accountable, and services meet state and federal standards.

Recommended Language for E.504.2

The Agency respectfully request that this revised language replace the language as drafted in this section in order to clarify, provide stability of services to Adult Education and Literacy students, and allow enough time for the State Board of Education to revise rulemaking to inform the next AEL grant competition.

(a) The Agency of Education shall amend current grant agreements with local adult education and literacy providers to extend the agreements for a term of two additional years.

(b) On or before August 15, 2025, the State Board of Education shall initiate rulemaking to amend Rule Series 2400 to ensure funds are distributed equitably across all regions of the State.

(c) For fiscal year 2028, the Agency of Education shall award a new round of competitive grant funds consistent with the amended State Board of Education rules.

Recommended Language for E.504.3

The language as written assumes that an Agency outside the Agency of Education should have responsibility. The Agency respectfully requests that the language in this

section be struck to allow for the Agency to engage in the amendment and rulemaking process proposed above.