

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

Re: H.454 – Transforming Vermont’s Education Governance, Quality, and Finance Systems

From: Chelsea Myers, Executive Director of Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) and

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the education policy elements of H.454.

At the Vermont Superintendents Association, we know that building a better education system isn’t about quick fixes. It’s about doing the hard, thoughtful, and necessary work of aligning our funding, governance, and operations with the values Vermonters hold dear: equity, opportunity, and sustainability.

We come to you with one clear message: transformational change is necessary—and it must be done thoughtfully, intentionally, and with students at the center.

Vermont has long held high expectations for its public education system, and rightfully so. We are a state that values equity, opportunity, and democratic engagement. But those values must now be matched with systems that can sustainably deliver on them. H.454, as passed by the House, offers a framework for change that is ambitious, comprehensive, and grounded in years of policy development. VSA supports the direction of the bill and urges the Senate to preserve its essential education policy components. We urge Vermont to proceed with care, because how we implement this legislation is just as important as what it contains.

Thoughtfulness, Intentionality, and the Focus on Students

Major structural change is hard. Vermont learned this firsthand during the development and implementation of Acts 153, 156, and 46. The goals of those laws were sound, but exhaustion, opposition, lack of statewide support, and inconsistent follow-through prevented their full realization. If we are to succeed this time, we must apply those lessons.

We urge the committee to proceed with a focus on long-term coherence, not short-term optics. Policy change of this magnitude demands intentional design, strong implementation planning, and continuous engagement with the professionals and communities most impacted. Change that lacks these qualities risks harming the very students and families we seek to support.

Cost Drivers

Our Association has testified extensively on the need to address the root cost drivers in the education system. While H.454 and other legislation introduced this session have begun to tackle some of these issues, such as staffing levels, the broader, systemic challenges driving education costs in Vermont remain largely unaddressed. We will continue to revisit these conversations year after year unless we confront the full picture: the lack of affordable housing, the rising cost of healthcare that consumes an increasing share of education budgets, the growing responsibility schools carry in providing mental health services, and the economic

reality that without more livable-wage jobs, Vermont will continue to face an aging population and a shrinking tax base.

Scale Must Be Systemic, Not Selective

We also caution against the temptation to treat district scale as a panacea. Cost efficiency will not be achieved by district merger alone. True scale must be addressed at every level of the system—governance, staffing, school size, class size, administration, and, yes, labor contracts.

Moreover, we caution against the assumption that district mergers will deliver immediate tax relief. In the short term, the costs of merging systems—including aligning contracts, operations, and infrastructure—may exceed any savings. Pay parity is an important goal, but it also represents a significant and currently unquantified cost. As we restructure, we must ask: *What are we doing about contracts and current debts?* Without a plan for managing these realities, we risk building a new system on an unstable foundation. We must be honest about those short-term costs. It is misleading to suggest that district scale alone will deliver meaningful tax relief, especially in the near term.

It is also important that we not lose sight of the most important goal – increased opportunities for students. In what ways are we keeping students central to these changes? The working group created in H.454 will be tasked with keeping research, data, and student opportunities front and center of the work. There is no evidence to support that merging into mega districts will have any measurable impact on student achievement or opportunities. In fact, there is no evidence that a 4,000-student minimum supports better student opportunity and operational efficiencies, especially in rural communities.

Student Voice Must Be at the Center

Perhaps the most important shift we can make in this moment is a philosophical one: to see students not just as beneficiaries of public education, but as co-designers of its future.

We deeply appreciate the committee’s decision to hear student testimony this Friday. This is more than symbolic—it’s foundational. As Cashel Higgins wrote in a recent OpEd in VTDigger:

“No one understands what’s working—and what’s not—better than we do... We’re the ones in the classroom every day. We’re the ones who experience the outcomes of these systems firsthand.”

Conclusion

H.454 offers a rare opportunity to move Vermont’s education system toward greater equity, opportunity, and sustainability. We support its direction. But success will require more than good policy language. It will require deep listening, long-term investment, and the courage to lead through complexity rather than around it.

The work ahead will be hard. Change of this magnitude requires patience, clarity, and a deep respect for the complexity of Vermont's educational landscape. It will take serious collaboration between state leaders, local communities, and the very people who live this work every day.

We're ready to do our part—and we're grateful for your commitment to getting it right.

Thank you.