

Vermont Principals' Association
Supporting Leaders & Learners

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To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols, Executive Director, Vermont Principals' Association

Date: 4/22/25

Subject: H.454 as passed by the Vermont House of Representatives.

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. I am also an appointee on the Commission for the Future of Public Education. I have been a principal in both supervisory school districts and supervisory unions and I have been the superintendent in supervisory unions and in supervisory districts.

My comments for this committee are around governance, scale, and opportunity for students as I believe these issues are most germane for the committee on education. My comments are related directly to H.454 as passed in the House and related considerations.

In making changes to the delivery model we can improve opportunities and real outcomes for students. Simply moving Supervisory Unions to slightly larger school districts all by itself would be a big step in the right direction. The House plan would eventually lead from well over a hundred districts to likely somewhere between 20-30. This would provide economies of scale and increase the population of what we call a school community from one town to a greater number of towns without completely eroding local control. The bigger our districts the less local control we will have. I think the House plan has a balance between local control and state responsibility at least compared to the five districts plan the administration has proposed. In the House plan it is likely that over time some small schools would close but at least citizens would have much more say then they would in any mega districts plan. With H.454, it is my hope that we can increase opportunities for students by getting to a better scale without completely destroying an educational system that has been in place for over 2 centuries and without eroding Vermont's commitment to democracy and some level of local control.

Some specific reasons we support H.454:

- It is a thoughtful transitional approach that doesn't completely blow up the system over night, this is especially important with the chaos coming out of Washington D.C. right now
- It strengthens the State Board and seeks to make the board politically neutral which is critical to avoid administration overreach in public education

- It allows for district lines to be drawn up for proposal to the General Assembly at least in part by experts who have actually worked in the field and understand the dynamics in local communities
- It recognizes that for there to be scale in many parts of the state, construction funding support will be critical
- It provides for “required” class sizes but allows for exemptions and waivers where appropriate
- It protects independent schools that serve over 51% of their students through public funds and serve as quasi-public schools in various parts of the state
- It calls for an aligned school calendar, common graduation requirements, and common data systems across the state. With just over 80,000 students this makes total sense and should be accomplished regardless of what else we do

I do think that some changes in governance need to take place. It is not likely that fundamental changes in opportunity will increase without governance changes. However, as I’ve mentioned previously, the larger the district the more likely that local citizens will be less empowered. I think it is key to try and find a balance between using scale to provide more educational opportunity while keeping the small school district feel that Vermonters want. I believe that with some work, H.454 can achieve that balance.

Now, I wholeheartedly believe larger supervisory districts that are at a scale of 2000-4000 where practicable is the way to go. I do not believe that the supervisory union structure is an appropriate governance structure when the state is trying to guarantee opportunities and better academic and social outcomes for all students. I also believe that in the wrong run, supervisory districts are more likely to support schools that are small by necessity while in a supervisory union these schools are likely to eventually be starved out of the system. Let me share a couple of specific reasons why I believe SD’s are better than SU’s:

- The transient student Supervisory Union vs. Supervisory District example
 - **Students from low-income families** move at **twice the rate** (or more) compared to their higher-income peers.
 - One national study from the U.S. Department of Education found that **approximately 30% of low-income students** had changed schools three or more times by 8th grade, compared to **just 10% of higher-income students**.
- Reduced in Force (RIF) Teacher protection example
- Larger scale to allow more courses especially at the high school level
 - AP example my old Supervisory Union
- Online learning courses within District without employee issues and issues around collectively bargained agreements
- Special education services for students who move within district vs. with SU

Lastly, at Commission meetings, in principal meetings of which I have some every week, and in conversation with Vermont citizens, it is important to acknowledge that not very many people are hollering for bigger school districts or closing of smaller schools. Everyone supports some

level of change ... provided it is not them that has to change! That said, what we have heard repeatedly is that people want more transparency in the education funding system, they by and large want lower taxes, and at the same time they support their schools overwhelmingly. If we come out of this Legislative session with a plan that will reduce cost or at the very least slow down the rate of increasing costs in education spending, I believe many Vermonters would consider that a win. Further, nothing in this plan really addresses the cost drivers that public education is facing – such as health insurance increases as the most glaring example – and we owe it to Vermonters to try and find a way to address these cost drivers that have nothing to do with providing a quality education to Vermont children. Finally, I would rather very little happen this legislative session than for something bad to happen that hurts our schools.

Research citing's:

1. Using Longitudinal Student Mobility Across Schools and Districts to Identify At-Risk Students

Authors: Dan Goldhaber, Cory Koedel, Umut Özek, Eric Parsons (2021)

This study utilizes administrative data from three states to examine nonstructural mobility events—school or district changes not resulting from planned transitions. The findings indicate that frequent nonstructural moves are strong indicators of low academic performance and reduced graduation rates. The study emphasizes that such mobility is more prevalent among students from low-income families. caldercenter.org

K-12 Education: Many Challenges Arise in Educating Students Who Change Schools Frequently

U.S. Government Accountability Office (2010)

This report discusses how frequent school changes are associated with lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates. It notes that the negative effects of mobility are more pronounced among low-income, African-American, and Hispanic students. The report also highlights challenges schools face in addressing the needs of highly mobile student populations. [GAO](https://www.gao.gov)

Student Mobility: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions

Author: Russell W. Rumberger (2015)

This policy brief explores the various causes of student mobility, including family-initiated moves due to economic hardships. It emphasizes that mobility can disrupt children's development and academic progress, with the most severe impacts observed in students who experience multiple moves, particularly those from low-income families. [National Education Policy Center](https://www.nationaleducationpolicycenter.org)

Key Study: *Student Mobility in Vermont Schools* (Annabelle Morgan, University of Vermont)

This 2008 dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of student mobility in Vermont from 1999 to 2004. It focuses on school changes not due to customary promotion and explores their educational correlates.

Key Findings:

- **Higher Mobility Among Low-SES Students:** Students participating in free or reduced lunch programs were more likely to change schools outside of standard grade progression.
- **Academic Performance:** Mobile students scored 3–10 percentile ranks lower than their non-mobile peers on standardized tests across various grade levels and subjects.
- **Portfolio Retention:** Mobile students were more likely to have kept academic portfolios (writing and mathematics) for only 0–1 years, compared to 2–5 years for stable students.
- **School-Level Impact:** Between 8% and 32% of the variation in student mobility was attributable to school-level composition and resources.

This study highlights that student mobility in Vermont is significantly associated with socioeconomic factors and has measurable impacts on academic achievement.