



To: Senate Education Committee
From: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director and General Counsel, VSBA
Re: Governor's Education Transformation Proposal: Governance
Date: February 28, 2025

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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 as new districts are created and existing districts are merged or eliminated over time.

School Board Size

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 U.S., there is no universally accepted ideal size 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 yes. Research concludes that the way school boards govern does indeed affect district-level performance. How do we know this?

The Iowa Lighthouse Study

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

Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards

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 strong and open lines of communication 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 community engagement. 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.

Comments from Dr. Phil Gore

Thank you, Sue. It is an honor to join you and the Vermont Senate 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, this school district adopted a policy to create “School Advisory Councils”, which are peer-elected teams composed of family members, 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 increasing the involvement of families and the community in the educational process. The SAC’s mission was to be a catalyst for change in schools to support student achievement.

However, over the past several years, the SACs in Philadelphia’s schools have struggled with their mission. These challenges stem from a lack of cohesive policies,

procedures and practices related to their operations. They also have had difficulty with 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. For instance, it demands significant time from the principal, who is required to be a member of the SAC. And as the school leader, the principal is responsible for ensuring the SAC’s creation and that it meets all of its duties throughout the year.

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

- Bylaws to define the roles and responsibilities of the SAC, its size, its membership, its structure, etc.
- How are members chosen? If by an application process, the timing and selection criteria. If by an election, who runs it and what are the procedures? Would elections be community-wide or would people be elected by their respective constituency group (e.g. parents, staff, students)?
- What would happen if a school can’t stand-up a functioning SAC? Are there consequences? Who’s accountable for this?
- 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?
- Are SAC meetings subject to Open Meeting Law and, if so, which requirements apply?

The overarching question about the SAC, which may be the most essential one, is: how would the chains of authority and accountability be impacted by this new structure?

In Vermont’s educational governance system today, authority and accountability are clear. Authority originates in the community, specifically the residents or voters, and flows directly to the school board. The board then delegates authority to the Superintendent, who in statute is called the CEO of the district. The Superintendent in turn delegates authority to their administrative team, and it continues from there to staff. Accountability flows in the opposite direction from staff back up through the administrative team, the Superintendent, the board and finally to the voters in the community.

Where would the SAC fit in the chain of authority and the chain of accountability?

Before I move on to summarize the VSBA’s response to Governor Scott’s Education Transformation Proposal, 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.

Summary of VSBA Response to Governor Scott's Proposal

The VSBA Board met in mid-February and most of the meeting was dedicated to reviewing and analyzing the Governor's Education Transformation Proposal.

As indicated earlier, the VSBA has significant concerns about the governance piece of the Governor's proposal, which decreases the number of school districts from 119 to 5. As you have heard today, Vermont's long tradition of local governance of its public schools is highly more likely to support improved student outcomes than more remote regionalized governance of Vermont public schools. Five school boards would not have a meaningful connection to local communities' visions and values for their schools.

Additionally, the Governor's proposal will fundamentally and dramatically change school board service in the state. Vermont's school board members come from all walks of life and have a proud history of non-partisan, volunteer service for their local communities. This change would politicize school boards by reducing the number of board members statewide from 900 to 25, less than the total number of senators who serve Vermont. These highly competitive races will introduce money into public education governance in a manner never before seen in Vermont. On top of that, this change will exclude those who don't have the ability to survive on a part-time position, making school board service an opportunity reserved for the retired or privileged.

Regarding the funding piece of the Governor's proposal, the VSBA priorities I provided to the Senate Education Committee earlier in the session still stand. Any funding changes must focus on students by providing sufficient funds to support equitable, high-quality education in Vermont schools. Superintendents and business managers have raised significant concerns about the sufficiency of the base funding amount proposed by Governor Scott. Further investigation, data and modeling are necessary in order to show the true impact of the proposed foundation formula.

Beyond the formula itself, we are baffled by the lack of measures to address the cost drivers behind the increase in education spending. As noted in earlier testimony to this committee, the cost of public school employees' health insurance exceeds \$300 million/year. The cost increased by 16% in FY25 and 12% in FY26. The cost of health insurance premiums and Health Reimbursement Arrangements are included in school district budgets and paid by Vermont taxpayers. These costs are consuming a larger and larger portion of Vermont school budgets. In 2018 when the statewide plan was authorized, health benefits made up less than 10% of school budgets. Fast forward a few years and it's now around 15%. If health benefits continue to grow at the current pattern, they will make up 20% of school budgets in a few years. To deal with this issue, school boards have to hold the line on the remaining parts of the budget. Bottom line: Healthcare is squeezing out other education initiatives.

Moving on to the quality piece of the Governor’s proposal, VSBA opposes the Governor’s proposal to move all rulemaking under the authority of the Agency of Education. As noted in the VSBA Task Force Report (submitted previously to the Committee as testimony and submitted again today), the Agency is not providing the data necessary to inform decision making now and underperforms in fulfilling its statutory responsibilities, including policy execution and compliance monitoring. Concentrating more authority in an Agency of Education that is unable to do the work it is currently responsible for is ill advised.

We support revitalizing the State Board of Education with a governance structure, independence and resources necessary to meet its statutory obligations and to provide effective leadership and oversight.

A stable, high functioning and non-partisan State Board of Education is essential for ensuring continuity of education leadership in Vermont - and reestablishing public trust through vision and accountability. We strongly urge the Senate Education Committee to hear testimony from the Chair of the VSBA Task Force on Collaboration to Benefit All Students and VSBA’s President on the Task Force Report.

Summary of Recommendations from the VSBA Task Force:

Priorities: *Vermont needs:*

1. *timely and consistent access to valid data*
2. *an Agency of Education and a State Board of Education that can uphold the statutory roles and responsibility to public education in a non-partisan, student centered manner*

Recommendations	Entity Responsible
<p>Expand and Maintain a Comprehensive & Accurate Data Dashboard by providing a publicly available, accurate and accessible data dashboard as a mechanism to ensure equity for all students and by utilizing data as the single most important way to effectively monitor the state’s ability to meet its education policy needs.</p>	AOE
<p>Improve the Capacity of the Agency of Education to Meet Statutory Responsibilities by conducting a comprehensive organizational analysis in order to understand why the AOE has been unable to meet its statutory responsibilities to oversee public education in VT. This analysis, inclusive of feedback from the field and an evaluation of the culture of the organization, should result in a redesign to support better Agency function.</p>	AOE
<p>Utilize the District Quality Standards to Conduct a Review of the Function of the State Board of Education The SBE should adhere to the governance standards outlined in Section 113 of the DQS and should be required to conduct an annual self-assessment on its own adherence to these standards.</p>	General Assembly, SBE

Recommendations	Entity Responsible
<p>Depoliticize the State Board of Education by restructuring to ensure that it can act in a non-political capacity. The appointment structure should be expanded so that the Governor does not have sole authority for appointing members. The SBE makeup should more proportionately represent local school board members from districts that operate a public school. SBE should have adequate resources to conduct its work, either through the budget allocation process or by leveraging AOE resources.</p>	<p>General Assembly</p>
<p>Prioritize Existing Legislation Attempts to implement new legislation without the underlying data and structures to support it will continue to put students and public education in jeopardy.</p>	<p>General Assembly, AOE</p>
<p>Acknowledge the work of the Commission on the Future of Public Education Recommendations to the General Assembly re: public education funding, delivery and governance will be addressed in the Commission’s work. This work needs to be completed in order for substantive improvements to be made.</p>	<p>General Assembly, AOE</p>

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.

Ford, Michael, "The Impact of School Board Governance on Academic Achievement in Diverse States" (2013). Theses and Dissertations. 329. <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/329>

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.