

Vermont Principals' Association
Supporting Leaders & Learners

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Senate Education
Response to Governor's Plan

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. Before my 8 years in this current role, I was a principal and superintendent for over 20 years serving in choice districts, non-choice districts, and as a superintendent with both in the same system. Additionally, I've taught Education Finance and Educational Leadership at the graduate level. I have decided to provide my testimony in the manner of bullet points: I've approached this trying to look at it from an Educational Finance, Governance, and practical impact on students in schools approach and will generally try to shape my testimony to that end.

Please consider these some high level comments on the Governor's Educational Transformation plan. Many of these comments, I also shared with House Ways and Means and House Education where much of the initial work on the Governor's plan has started. I also want to say publicly, I applaud the Governor coming forward with a plan and helping us to have these important conversations – many of which are long overdue, including conversations around scale and student opportunity.

- First, do no harm. Do not rush into financial decisions without looking at potential unintended consequences. This should go without saying AND oftentimes political pressure to do something leads to rash decisions with long term negative impacts. I believe we are already seeing this in some school districts that most of us would already consider right-sized that are making really significant staffing cuts that are taking away opportunities for many of their students.
- Equity is key. Many foundational formulas in some states have actually contributed to disparity. The details really matter. If you have a foundation formula that is underfunded and allows locals to raise more money, poorer districts will typically go with the minimal base amount and wealthier districts will vote to spend more – leading to greater inequities. This happened in Alaska, for example, when the state for many years went without raising the foundation formula base amount.
- Formulas that are looked at every legislative cycle can be held hostage to the political whims of the day and of course the economic context of the times. A formula would need to have an appropriate Base Education Amount, appropriate weighting for higher cost to educate students AND some type of inflationary index built into the law so that future General Assembly's don't underfund public education.

- Do not decrease the amount of money going to school districts before fixing key cost drivers such as health insurance increases, unfunded mandates, scale and governance issues. If you just lower the amount you spend in education funding without doing the hard work of making necessary changes you will simply cut programs and hurt schools and kids. That is a fact. The idea we could cut nearly \$200 million dollars from education funding without making any governance changes first is nonsensical to me. The only way you make those type of cuts is to cut personnel. When you cut personnel, especially without changing governance, and moving toward so called right sizing, the problems are still there, the kids still have the same issues, there are just less people and resources to support those issues. That should be a non-starter.
- It concerns me that we may end up with a system in which there will be a Base Education Amount that may not really be enough to sufficiently fund the system and then local districts will go out to voters for a levy or tax on a greater amount. For example, the \$13,200 base amount has already been called into question by financial experts including Dr. Tammy Kolbe from UVM and one of the authors of the pupil weighting numbers that we just implemented recently. To the degree possible, we need to meet the spirit of Brigham and ensure that the state is responsible for the education of all Vermont students and that means that our most vulnerable students and communities are protected.
- We need to make sure that any base amount and weighting formula would apply to all schools whether independent or public if they are utilizing public monies. We currently have an inequitable system and we should take steps to make sure it is as equitable as possible. I realize the Governor's plan tries to do that with the school choice concept they are proposing. I have a lot of questions about that and I'm glad to see the Governor's plan seemingly acknowledge that some non-public schools that are currently receiving public funding probably should not be
- How do we address the huge disparities in salaries across the state? One of my biggest concerns with a move to just five school districts – at sizes that much research indicates may be too big in terms of student outcomes, is how do we address those major differences? For a lot of reasons, going from 119 districts to five districts makes no sense and there is no research that I can find anywhere that supports the five districts concept. In fact, the AOE has stated this number simply came from superintendent regions – which is simply a mechanism for superintendent meetings and has no connection whatsoever to the delivery system. Teachers, working in the same districts, are rightly going to want to be paid the same amount with similar years of experience and similar positions. The vast differences in pay scale is another reason why I think 5 districts for the whole state is much too aggressive in such a short timeline. I think a better approach would be to make all supervisory unions into school districts and to combine school districts that are deemed to be too small for effectiveness and efficiencies and start from there. I don't have a magic number, but much national research talks about anywhere from 2000 to 10,000 as a sweet spot for School Districts. If you are too small you will not have the opportunities for kids that a bigger district can offer. If you are too large, you lose effectiveness, become less efficient, more bureaucratic and the individual student can get lost. It will be much easier to combine contracts with close by neighbors than it

will be across vast geographical areas. The General Assembly could set these parameters with the metrics that you select with the use of research, Vermont demographics, our rurality, tradition etc. and decide the right district size for Vermont. Doing it this way – moving into larger districts but not mega districts, will allow for a lot of local control. The District Board would have oversight of all the schools, some school may indeed have to close, some may be repurposed, but the decisions would be at the local district level (not the town level) and the District would have standards they would have to reach and adhere to in terms of class size, programming offerings, etc.

- Facilities are another major concern. If we were going to start from scratch our system would not look the way it does today. Larger comprehensive high schools and larger comprehensive middle schools with greater scale and an abundance of CTE offerings for all high school students would be fantastic. Unfortunately, we have the facilities that we have. Some school construction is going to have to take place. This means as a state we need to not only support school construction in theory, but also put a funding source into place for school construction. And, through that process we will have to make some tough decisions. In some places, new construction will be necessary. And, some buildings should be deemed not worthy of putting state construction funds into. As a state we will need to make those decisions.
- A big concern for me in the Governor’s plan is moving many responsibilities away from the State Board of Education to the Agency of Education. I could talk about this bullet as long as you would like and have testified in the past plenty of times that I believe Vermonters would be better served with a Department, with a Commissioner and a strong independent State Board, rather than an Agency with a Secretary who works under the direction of the Governor. That is NOT about this Governor or this Secretary of Education who are both very smart and hardworking individuals, I just think a neutral and independent state board that oversees a Commissioner who is answerable to that board better represents education and all Vermonters. For me, it is a question of checks and balances that I believe is necessary for a democracy to truly flourish.
- Classroom size. Looking at research. I would recommend that if we are going to impose class sizes, I would differentiate between high school and later elementary and from the early grades. Early grades 15ish on average is a good class size. 4th through 8th grade I believe up to 20 students would be best. At the high school level up to 25 kids per class. I would try not to exceed these numbers on average. At the end of this document, I attached several resources related to class size that I believe worth Senate Education Committee members viewing.
- Lastly, in terms of concerns, as a long time superintendent you may be surprised to hear me say this, with six different school boards and way too many Board meetings, negotiation sessions for each town for many years, etc. All that said, I strongly oppose the idea of going to 25 school board members and/or five Boards for the entire state. I heard, I believe, Allen Gilbert say when giving public comments to the Commission on the Future of Public Education that I sit on that we would have more senators in Vermont than school board members. I could never support that; that in my perspective is just taking away too much local control from the citizenry and I believe the Advisory Committee concept would just be one more thing for our already overtaxed principals to

have to contend with. I do agree though that we should get rid of Supervisory Unions. They often create another layer that eliminates opportunities of scale and efficiencies in many cases.

- I do want to say that the plan to keep education dollars in Vermont to the degree practicable makes a great deal of sense. And many of the other concepts proposed by the Agency and the Administration are worthy of further discussion and examination – for example the school choice concepts included in the proposal.

Some advantages to improving scale – say to 20-30 districts:

- Less suppression of standardized test and other student results because of federal law (higher number of students harder to identify individual students so data can be shared publicly)
- Easier to move staff where student need is
- Protection of staff in a larger system as removing programs etc. due to declining enrollment in one building might allow for a staff member to retain their position just in a different (close by) school
- Boards will be more likely to focus on Budget, Policy, Goal-setting, Mission Leading and not get into day-to-day management issues
- Easier process for students who transition from one school in the larger district to another. E.g. as a Supt. high poverty students moving frequently just a town or two away and having a completely different educational experience because they crossed “district-lines”

Some resources on Class Size:

<https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/small-classes-big-possibilities>

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/does-your-childs-class-size-matter>

<https://www.screenflex.com/debate-over-class-size/>

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/class-size-what-research-says-and-what-it-means-for-state-policy/>

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495953.pdf>

<https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/fact-sheet-on-upper-grades.pdf>