

Vermont Principals' Association
Supporting Leaders & Learners

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Written Testimony

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Senate Finance

Response to the Governor's Budget Address and Education Transformation Plan

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director the Vermont Principals' Association.

- The Governor said he was going to be bold and his plan certainly is that. I appreciate him coming to the table with a conceptual proposal; of course we need to see the details and there are a lot of things to consider. Now is the time for flushing out proposed details, discussing those details, and having conversations as to the best path forward. We support the Governor's goals of a world class education at a price Vermonter's can afford and it is likely that there will be varying views on how to get there.
- The concept of using one time funds to take care of a projected 6% education spending increase this fiscal year is one we are certainly interested in. It is important to recognize though that much of that increase is caused by cost drivers that are often essentially out of control to local school districts. Even though I represent principals, it is important to note that School Board members in particular are put in positions in which they have very few levers to pull other than cutting staff and eliminating programs. The Governor acknowledged this and I appreciate that. However, he did not mention cost drivers. Any plan needs to focus on cost containment of drivers such as health insurance as a perfect example. School officials have no say over these costs so a statewide strategy in this area is necessary especially since VT has amongst the highest health insurance costs on average in the nation.
- He also talked about educational equity and quality. Again, we have agreement on this concept. Every Vermont child deserves to have a high quality education, every Vermont teacher and other school employees deserve a fair wage. This is true whether they are in an Independent/Private or Public school if they are receiving public dollars. If money is coming out of the Education Fund than our stance over the last few years has been Same Dollars, Same Rules as a simply fundamental principle that all schools should live by. Vermont owes that to all of our children.
- And, I think there is general agreement that in many cases we have scale that is not efficient or effective. We need to approach closing and/or combining of schools in a

nuanced manner. We need to make sure that we take in consideration things like time on a school bus for children and the future of small communities that may lose their school when in many places the school is the center of the community. This doesn't mean we don't need to act but that we need to be thoughtful about it.

- In 2005 or 2006 if memory serves me correctly, the Vermont Superintendents Association came forth with a plan that would have taken every supervisory union and turned them into single school districts with one board. I was a Supt. at the time and we were talking about moving from hundreds of districts to around 60. That was considered pretty radical at the time; now we are talking about moving to five districts across the state – that might be a bridge too far too soon. I worry about scale, I worry about schools on the outskirts of these bigger districts not feeling as though they have representation at the Board level and I worry about schools and communities not being or feeling valued.
- The Base Education Amount and having a realistic inflator tied to cost of living or some other index will be important. Many states that have used a Foundation Formula have used the formula to squeeze public education while providing more money to choice schemes and private schools and voucher programs. Oftentimes, General Assemblies and Governor's simply refuse to provide the financial resources necessary for schools to be successful – a good case of that is Alaska in which for years they did not raise the Base Education Amount, poor school districts suffered greatly and rich districts with oil money and other resources were not impacted – thus leading to great inequities.
- The Governor mentioned only 3500 private school children but we need to make sure we have accountability for that system too. If we are going to have these 5 big districts, we need to look at what that means for those schools. Perhaps they become part of the big districts that are in their area, we still keep those schools where the big new boards think it is appropriate to do so and we have everyone follow the same rules.
- Any protections to tax payers let's make sure we protect the people that need the relief. Let's not make working people pay more, let's not be regressive. Right now wealthier Vermonter's pay a lower percentage of their income than middle class Vermonter's. That is something we should definitely fix.

Final comments added after hearing the proposal was to cut essentially just under \$200 million from the current education funding system:

- Without structural and governance changes first this makes no sense
- It will starve out schools, cut important programs and resources for needy children and significantly negatively impact an already overwhelmed system. It may compel changes that help the system in the long run – I want to be clear about that – however, the damage in the short run and to our current students who are all still suffering from the impacts of the pandemic is not worth it. We need to find a middle ground that provides financial relief without destroying our system and leaving students behind
- I think savings CAN be realized and at the very least we can strongly reduce the increased growth of education spending – to do that though we have to address cost

drivers that are out of the control of school districts like health insurance, unfunded mandates, money spent on things from the education fund that are not education related.

- Base Education Amount matters. When starting a new funding formula we should not approach it from a deficit model. Just cutting a bunch of money and telling school districts good luck is not an appropriate approach. They need the tools to make cuts and much of that will be dependent on scale and governance changes. To ask for this level of cuts, which is essentially what we are asking for, without changing governance and scale first, will hurt kids and programs. We can't move the cart without the horses; putting the horses first, in other words getting control of cost drivers, governance, scale all need to happen before looking for the cost savings.

Respectfully submitted,
Jay Nichols