

May 9, 2024

Chairs Kornheiser, Conlon, Cummings and Campion
Vermont General Assembly
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

RE: Comments on the Yield Bill

Dear Chairs Kornheiser, Conlon, Cummings and Campion:

I am writing to share the Vermont Agency of Education's thoughts and feedback on the proposals and process to address the critical equity and cost challenges in Vermont's education system, that are contained in this year's yield bill, H.887.

I write this having just reviewed recent data on the status of school district budgets. I wanted to take the opportunity to flag some serious and concerning equity issues among the cohort of districts who have failed to pass budgets, which highlight deeper and more systemic educational challenges beyond our current financial crisis.

As of yesterday, 23 districts remain without a budget. Of those districts, 13 have a poverty rate of over 50%, and 14 out of 23 have more students in poverty than the statewide average. Additionally, among this number are some of our lowest spending districts that have historically had the lowest funding per weighted student, such as Enosburgh-Richford, Slate Valley, and Lamoille South. I am sharing this information to reinforce that the districts harmed this year by our education cost crisis are districts that support some of Vermont's most vulnerable students, and districts that often do this in the context of budget uncertainty year over year.

I have noticed that during this conversation we have talked a lot about how Vermont communities and Vermont taxpayers will be harmed by the cost increases. This is true, and I trust that we will continue to explore solutions that alleviate the burden on taxpayers. In addition, I want to take the opportunity to highlight another part of the story. Vermont students, Vermont teachers, and Vermont school support staff also suffer under an inequitable, incoherent system.

I believe strongly that we need to take concrete steps this year, to begin the process of developing a multi-year strategy, focusing first on



stabilizing and then elevating our public education system. From the field, I have heard the call to create a unifying vision for education and, at the same time, a need to focus on the pragmatic work of preparing for the next school year. We must do both, all while supporting the districts and schools that most need our help.

We must first fortify the system by addressing the equity and cost challenges that impact educational quality statewide. Only then can we fully focus on reframing and visioning. To this end, we suggest accelerating the review of immediate educational needs, so we may begin formulating legislative proposals that create improvements for the 2025-2026 school year. This will maintain forward progress, while allowing time for meaningful engagement on myriad challenges we face.

In this context, as you negotiate the final structure of the commissions and task forces in the bill, I ask that you do your utmost to strike a balance between the urgency of the moment, and the need for a robust, careful and methodical process. We need to remain task-focused, and by way of this letter I want to share my public commitment that in any conversations about structural reform, the Agency will do its utmost to engage, and listen to, the field.

I am looking forward to working with you, and my colleagues in the education system, to develop thoughtful, meaningful, workable reform that equitably provides the education our students deserve at a cost our communities can afford.

Sincerely yours,



Zoie Saunders, M.Ed.
Interim Secretary of Education

