VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION
SUPPORTING LEADERS + LEARNERS

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To: Senate & House Education Committees
Date: January 9, 2026
Subject: Act 73 Redistricting Report; Legislative Priorities,
From: Jay Nichols, Senior Executive Director Vermont Principals' Association

For the record, I am Jay Nichols and I represent the Vermont Principals' Association. Good afternoon Committee members and thanks for your service. I've been asked to speak about the Redistricting Task Force work on Act 73 as well as the VPA's Legislative priorities.
I have attached our Legislative priorities and at any time am willing to come in and discuss any of those priorities in as much detail as either committee would like.

Today in my limited time, I'll comment on the VPA's main priority; which of course is effective implementation of Act 73.

Act 73 : Main Priority
The following four points come from our Executive Council which is made up of 15 school leaders from around the state and below them are some bullets to consider that support our main points:

1. *Take the time to do transformation effectively*
   - Act 73 has been very rushed from the VPA's perspective and that of the majority of Vermonters we have heard from. At the VPA, we work with a lot of organizations, not just schools, around effective leadership. We use a construct entitled D.A.C. which stands for Direction, Alignment, Commitment. You want to begin with the end in mind. And plan from there. What we have heard from the Administration and many in the General Assembly is that we need to reduce education costs. Period. With improving schools as an afterthought, if discussed at all; and the level of detail on how schools would improve is lacking from the VPA's perspective. We are not saying that reducing cost is something we should discard – but cutting costs to simply cut costs is narrow and short term thinking. There are a number of cost drivers that Act 73 doesn't appear to be addressing but that local school board's and districts must contend with. The biggest example of that is health care, but we also have the increased needs of students and schools responding to those needs with providing mental health services and other services within the school. School Districts are responding to the needs of their students – and at the same time being beat up in the media, often by public officials who should know better, for increased costs to schools over which they have very little control.
   - I'd like to point out that we had a Commission for the Future of Public Education in Vermont that was supposed to take the lead in much of this work around education transformation and was supported by the General Assembly. That work was dismantled by the General Assembly after the Governor presented his 5 megadistrict plan. The Commission was focused on Equity, Quality, and Sustainability & Affordability. We still think those are the correct considerations but are worried that the concern for affordability is clouding judgement; and are especially concerned that we don't really see how Act 73, as it is currently configured, is going to reduce costs without forcing some schools to cut key programming and forcing others schools to increase spending. We believe this is a realization that the majority of the Redistricting Task Force concluded as well. And for the record,

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the VPA would like to state that we appreciate the work of that Task Force in a very compressed timeline.

2. Make decisions on what is best for students and the state overall in the long term (politically expedient decisions should be treated as enemies of what we are hoping to accomplish)

- There is a concept we also use in leadership circles entitled Upstream Thinking. This is about planning ahead, not just responding to crisis situations. In Vermont, for perhaps decades, we have been in crisis response mode; which could perhaps be called downstream thinking. We let health care become a crisis, we let housing become a crisis, we let population decline become a crisis, and then we try to respond to these crisis situations, and we are not blaming anyone for this downstream thinking but perhaps it is time to engage in some upstream thinking.
- For example, Senator Ram Hinsdale recently mentioned the General Assembly needs to dig into school construction. We completely agree. Let's start planning for what our school infrastructure should look like and design from there. We can't really effectively transform our educational system to a world class system with the terrible infrastructure we have now. We need to stop kicking the can on this and school construction funding needs to be part of any education transformation. I heard testimony earlier this week from the Bond Bank that our 6 billion dollar infrastructure deficit to bring school buildings to where we need them to safely be is growing by around a quarter of a billion dollars each year! And with ever increasing construction costs … the longer we wait the harder it will be to construct safe, modern, and highly effective and efficient school facilities.
- Another example is to streamline governance units in the state. In many places we have an outdated governance structure that ties Superintendent's hands in terms of sharing staff and causes great redundancy for central office personnel and in many cases takes away opportunities for some students. The governor is correct, 119 school districts is too many. However, getting to the "correct" number should be approached in a rational and surgical manner – using a scalpel approach to cutting instead of a chain saw approach.
- A final example here is that we should consider removing aspects of the education system that should be part of the general fund. The education fund is often used for political expedient decisions, what we need to acknowledge is every time we add cost to the education fund, we are increasing property taxes for Vermonters. There are some great things that we pay for in our education fund but we should either move them to the General Fund or stop blaming schools for increases to education spending: (e.g. teacher retirement, out of control health care costs, school resource officers, employees hired for student mental health needs, universal meals, - we are not suggesting cutting any of these things just that we stop blaming school districts for the costs associated with these state choices)

3. Move toward governance systems that are streamlined, provide more opportunities for students, are cost effective, and are not redundant

- We do think a voluntary and encouraged BOCES type of program, as described in the Redistricting Task Force Report, is something we should lean into; voluntary mergers when and wherever school districts are willing to do so; the risk of this of course is adding more bureaucratic layers to an already highly bureaucratic governance system in many parts of the state. And, it is unlikely that this is going to lead to immediate financial cost cutting which seems to be a major impetus as I've already stated.
- Moving from Supervisory Unions to School Districts for example would provide more opportunities for students, are less redundant and are more cost effective in general. There would

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need to be a lot of work done to make this happen and we understand the Governor's desire to have less school districts and recognize that this idea has merit. However, the devil is in the detail and we don't think forcing systems that have never worked together into new larger districts will be received well by Vermonters, will save substantial finances in the short term, and we worry that forced mergers will further dysregulate a fragile educational delivery system.

- Supervisory Unions if forced to merge their current structures into school districts making up the same members would at least have neighbors within their existing structure that have worked together in many areas which would make merger much smoother. These Supervisory Union's that already have working relationships could become School Districts which are more efficient than Supervisory Unions – we are only suggesting this type of merger construct if the General Assembly continues to support forced mergers as are contemplated in Act 73. By doing this, you might also get bigger districts that are willing to create bigger governance structures voluntarily as a next step.

4. Remove 4000-8000 language and substitute 1000-4000

- The 4000-8000 language doesn't seem to have any research related basis for rural states, like Vermont. And perhaps there should be no number language at all. It seems to derive from out-of-state consultants looking at a perfect cookie cutter system which is not something that we have in our state. If the General Assembly decides to continue with the approach of forced consolidation and decides there needs to be a number of students target for a new district, I strongly suggest moving to 1000-4000 language. If you did that, the vast majority of school districts would at least be allowed to work with neighbors that they already have working relationships with. This will be critical as we look to align policy, contracts, compensation, etc. Schools that are already in a district of at least 1000 students could be encouraged to join neighbors to create larger districts when and where it makes sense to do so. This would move us from 119 districts to 50 or so immediately. There would be lots of work to accomplish this type of governance consolidation, but it would be much more manageable than trying to form larger districts consisting of many smaller school districts that have had no working relationship together prior to being forced to consolidate.

Foundation Formula Comments:

- I've talked to a number of Superintendents, Board Members, Business Managers, and of course principals and assistant principals. I've not heard any that support the idea of five or some such similar number of districts for the entire state. I'm certainly not 100% opposed to a Foundation Formula but I am really worried about unintended consequences and I don't believe all members of the General Assembly, much less Vermont citizens have any understanding of potential concerns. My understanding of the Administration's approach to the Foundation Formula is that the scale they proposed – or something similar (e.g. 4000-8000 students) is necessary to make the foundation formula scheme work. Many of us fear that moving to systems of this size, and perhaps more importantly, trying to combine numerous government entities into new ones may completely dismantle the system. The combining of employee contracts, policies, governance procedures, school board construct is all time consuming and very difficult work. Giving federal concerns in education, our school employees are nervous about the future and feeling a little beat up. The more we can do to stabilize the system the better.

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- However, if we just impose a foundation formula (with no regionally differences accounted for) without finding scale, is the math actually going to work? We really need to see modeling and the impacts. Will we have places that will have a lot more money to spend on education … but many of their citizens will not be able to afford their taxes; will it become much worse than it is now in many parts of the state? I've been assured that this won't happen but I am still worried about it. Conversely, will we have parts of the state in many cases that already have larger classrooms than average –in Chittenden County for example, that will be forced to make many cuts to programs to get to the Foundation Formula number (what we are calling the Educational Opportunity Payment). Many of these school districts have already made significant cuts to personnel and programming and we are already worried about the impact to kids and don't see how we will improve students' lives by cutting programs and opportunities from them.

  Wherever the General Assembly ends up with final decisions and the Governor passes something into law, the VPA will support the implementation process consistent with our overall mission and goals to uphold the public mission of schools to provide equitable learning opportunities for all Vermont students.

  Respectfully submitted and looking forward to further conversation.

  Jay Nichols