

House Education Committee
S.371
Remarks by Lisa Ventriss, President,
Vermont Business Roundtable
April 15, 2008

INTRO

Good morning. For the record, my name is Lisa Ventriss, President of Vermont Business Roundtable. I am joined this morning by Tom Torti, President, Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce.

During the 20 years since its inception as a 501c4 civic welfare organization, the Roundtable has dedicated itself to thoughtful, deliberative, and well-documented analyses of significant public policy issues affecting all Vermonters. From our first report in 1988 entitled, "Population and Employment Forecast" to the 2006 education report entitled, "Having the Courage to Change", the Roundtable has engaged in research and analysis, collaboration, and communication and advocacy to bring a uniquely balanced, non-partisan, and long-range perspective to policymaking in Vermont.

Our 2005 study, conducted jointly with the LCRCC, entitled Public K-12 Education Expenditures, Phase I, contributed to a more thorough investigation into the cost-drivers of Vermont's education system. As we have testified before in this committee, it presented many more questions than answers, and prompted a Phase II, conducted by the Legislature.

That public dialogue prompted conversations in late 2006 between Jeff Francis of the Vermont Superintendents Association, and I, to eventually form the Business-Education Alliance, a group dedicated to developing mutual understanding and respect for each others issues and priorities; to inform each other's thinking with factual information and industry insight; and, to find common ground that could lay the foundation for policy recommendations.

Our members include the Roundtable, LCRCC and GBIC; and the VPA; VSBA; and VSA. We have been led by two co-chairs, Mary Moran, Superintendent, Rutland City Schools, (here today) and Mary Powell, Chief Operating Officer, Green Mountain Power. And to facilitate our work and

manage us to a productive end, we engaged a consultant, Val Gardner, former principal of Champlain Valley Union High School.

Since January 2007 we have been working together to examine both cost and governance issues. Next week we will be issuing our final report but, today, we are here as representatives of the Business-Education Alliance to address the governance provisions of S.371 and share our recommendations.

The Alliance has observed the following problems and concerns:

1. Currently, Vermont lacks a unified vision, plan or approach to education sufficient to ensure that the state will prosper in the future.
2. The lack of an articulated statewide vision and goals inhibits the ability of the system to uniformly deliver quality programs, to consistently use resources effectively and efficiently, and to marshal resources from outside the state.
3. The executive branch is accountable only tangentially through the appointment of the State Board of Education. Therefore, there is no formal connection between the state education system and other functions or agencies of state government.
4. This has resulted in limited accountability at the executive level and in cost shifts from various agencies to local education entities and the education fund with little or no transparency. The consequences of this level of functioning and governance are distrust, lack of respect for each other's roles, and lost opportunities.
5. While the Commissioner of Education is statutorily designated as the leader and steward for public education in Vermont, the current structure does not fully support this role. At this time, there is no one position in the state that is clearly able to provide the leadership needed to define and implement a truly transformational education initiative.

The majority of Alliance members support the recommendations in our forthcoming report. There are two recommendations, in particular, that speak to governance issues addressed in S.371.

Recommendation #1:

Establish a Governor-appointed Vermont PreK-12 Education board comprising persons knowledgeable about and interested in public education who are committed to providing a high quality and efficient system of public education in Vermont. Our model would recommend the board has eleven (11) members, with terms of four years or more, in the following composition:

- ❖ Two members at large, appointed by the Governor;
- ❖ One parent member, appointed by the Governor;
- ❖ One member from within a pool nominated by each of the following organizations:
 - Business representative (Roundtable)
 - Independent School rep (Vermont Council of independent Schools)
 - Higher Education rep (UVM trustees)
 - Higher Education rep (State College trustees)
 - Local school board member (VSBA)
 - School superintendent (VSA)
 - School principal (VPA)
 - School teacher (VNEA)

We recommend the duties of the Education Board include:

- Elect the chair of the Board
- Carry out duties statutorily assigned to the Education Board
- Consult with the Secretary of Education on the preparation of the Agency budget
- Promulgate administrative rules on behalf of the Agency of Education
- Serve as the quasi-judicial body for the Agency of Education
- Advise the Secretary and Governor on education legislation under consideration by the General Assembly

Recommendation #2

Create the position of a Governor-appointed Secretary of Education with the following qualifications:

- Expertise in public education management and policy
- Demonstrated leadership abilities

- Demonstrated management abilities

In addition, the Secretary of Education appointment is approved by the Education Board and subject to the advice and consent of the General Assembly.

We appreciate the opportunity to deliver these comments on behalf of the Business-Education Alliance.