

## ***Ending Strikes and Imposition a Positive Step for Public Education***

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School boards have been active partners in legislative efforts to address education governance and funding this session, because they believe constructive changes are necessary to preserve a strong and sustainable public education system. The future of Vermont depends on achieving that goal. In order to meet the needs of today's students, educators and communities, protecting the status quo is not an option.

One important element of the public education system is the collective bargaining process. The VSBA is supportive of collective bargaining as a means of ensuring fair working conditions for teachers. Board members know that well-qualified teachers are the key to an excellent education. A robust and balanced collective bargaining process helps us attract and retain great educators.

We also believe that some modifications are necessary in order to improve our public education system overall. When the collective bargaining process breaks down, and the parties resort to imposition of a contract or a strike, the impacts on the community are significant and felt for many years. For that reason, school boards can accept giving up the right to impose contracts in exchange for eliminating the right of teachers to strike.

All other New England states prohibit teacher strikes and imposition of contracts. H.76 as amended by the House Education Committee establishes a process that would eliminate the right to strike and impose contracts and call for the parties to use mediation and factfinding in order to arrive at an agreement. It does not include mandatory arbitration.

School boards across Vermont will not support an approach that includes binding arbitration because it would turn over important decisions that impact up to 80 percent of school budgets to out-of-state arbitrators generally unfamiliar with community issues and Vermont's education finance system. This approach is undemocratic and strikes at the heart of local control.

H.76 as passed by the House Education Committee creates tighter timeframes for the process, mandatory mediation and fact-finding. With no "nuclear options," the parties are expected to continue to bargain in good faith. Six months after expiration, the Vermont Labor Relations Board reviews the situation and offers proposals for settlement, and the parties continue to negotiate.

If there is no settlement a year after contract expiration, there is no retroactive pay for the employees and a 1 cent penalty on taxpayers. Both penalties are designed to make delay unpalatable for both sides.

H.76 as amended is a very reasonable approach to a thorny problem. Strikes and imposition of contracts do serious damage to relationships within communities and harm students and families. H.76 now avoids the significant downsides to binding arbitration and creates a pathway forward that is in line with the proven practice in place in many other states.

H.76 as amended does not tilt the balance in favor of either side. Both unions and school boards will lose the right to undertake drastic unilateral action. That's fair. Teachers can still negotiate as equals with school boards over their salaries, benefits and related terms of employment. That's fair. Both school boards and unions will face penalties if they fail to reach a contract settlement in a timely manner. That's absolutely fair.

The VT-NEA compares this bill to anti-union efforts in states like Wisconsin. That is simply not the case. In Wisconsin, teachers were stripped of their right to bargain over important matters like salary schedules, supplemental compensation and reduction in force provisions. This bill does absolutely nothing to disturb the fundamental rights of educators to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment with their employers.

What this bill does do is create an expectation that the adults in our school systems will do precisely what it is we expect our students to do. Work constructively through difficult problems. Don't walk away or take drastic unilateral action if you can't get the outcome you want. Work it out. This bill isn't anti-union. It's pro-student, pro-educator and pro-community.