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To: House Education Committee
From: Nicole L. Mace, Executive Director
Re: H. 794
Date: April 3, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.794. Since the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) is tasked with performing certain functions in this bill as introduced, I would like to take a minute to discuss the VSBA and its work. The VSBA is a private 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization governed by a 23-member board of directors. The mission of the VSBA is to support local and supervisory union boards to be effective trustees for education in their communities, and to provide a strong collective voice in defining and driving Vermont's public education policy. The VSBA has a strong interest in promoting equity and social justice in schools, and are appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this discussion.

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The VSBA's current strategic plan has a specific goal area related to educational equity. The plan sets the following objectives:

- School boards and public education leaders at the state and local level are committed to ensuring that the futures of all Vermont's children are driven by their aspirations, not bound by their circumstance.
- Equity is seen as an ongoing goal that informs all choices.
- Boards and administrators understand how to leverage the resources within their system to assure equity.

In the Fall of 2016, the theme of our annual conference (in partnership with the VSA), was *Fulfilling the Promise of Equity*, featuring a keynote and work sessions on implicit bias led by the Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. We also included a student panel on implicit bias in Vermont schools. In the Spring of 2017, the VSA brought these same speakers from the Kirwan Institute back to Vermont and invited teams from Vermont schools to continue the work on acknowledging and addressing implicit bias in schools.

For the past year, the VSBA has been a member of the NEA's institutional racism task force, where we have focused our contributions on how school district policy can address systemic racial bias and discrimination.

In January, the VSBA and VSA (Vermont Superintendents Association) held a two-day retreat designed to reinvigorate our work on the [*Agenda for a World-Class Education System*](#). While there has been a lot of progress at the state policy level connected with the *Agenda*, VSBA and VSA leaders understand more supports are required in order to ensure implementation of key initiatives (universal pre-K, flexible pathways, proficiency-based learning, and governance reform) happens in an equitable manner throughout the state.

Before the retreat could focus on equitable implementation of programs, we needed to unpack the ways in which structural inequities form: through the intersection of individual biases, institutional practices, and formal policies. We designed the first day of the retreat to help attendees understand their own perspectives and experiences related to racial, economic, and social inequities. We identified examples of structural inequities in Vermont school districts. And we developed a working definition of equity, designed to inform initiatives at the state level and within local communities. The working definition adopted by our two organizations is:

Educational equity means that each student receives the resources and educational opportunities they need to learn and thrive.

- ***Equity means*** that a student's success is not predicted nor predetermined by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, family economics, class, geography, disability, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or initial proficiencies.
- ***Equity means*** that every school provides high quality curriculum, programs, teachers and administrators, extracurricular activities and support services.
- ***Equity goes*** beyond formal equality where all students are treated the same. Achieving equity may require an unequal distribution of resources and services.
- ***Equity involves*** disrupting inequitable practices, acknowledging biases, employing practices that reflect the reality that all students will

learn, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children.

The next step for this work includes the development of an *Equity Tool Kit*, with a model policy, procedures, and discussion guide for boards and communities. We expect that work to take place this spring and summer.

The VSBA board spent time at its February meeting discussing H.794 – both in terms of the bill directing the organization to perform specific tasks, and creating new requirements for school districts. I want to be clear that the language I shared with Rep. Morris and which the Committee saw earlier this session was not intended to suggest the VSBA board endorses the bill or the specific language. It was intended to remove the VSBA from the bill as performing what is essentially a function of state government.

The VSBA board agrees that, as a non-profit, private organization, it should not be directed by state statute to perform specific tasks – duties that are more appropriately directed to the Agency of Education. As a practical matter, any time the state or federal government requires school districts to adopt a policy, the VSBA works with partners to develop and distribute a model policy. We do not need to be directed by state statute to perform this service for our members.

The board also expressed concerns that for ethnic and social equity work to be effective in schools, districts need more than a mandate for a policy. Absent resources to schools to support educators, administrators, and board members in unpacking issues surrounding bias, racism, and inequality, the VSBA board fears that a policy requirement will lead to increased frustration in the field about adding requirements without sufficient resources to support effective implementation.

The VSBA board also believes that the ethnic studies standards called for by the bill are important and require the support and oversight of the Agency of Education and State Board. Our understanding is that the Agency and State Board have relied on the work of national organizations with expertise in standards and curriculum when making recent updates to Vermont's standards on science, technology, engineering, and math. The VSBA board would hope that similar resources could be brought to bear to support the work of developing ethnic studies standards. We strongly encourage this

Committee to hear from the AOE regarding the resources it would need to support this effort.

A focus on ethnic and social equity is important to the work we all do, both for the costs that are incurred when some students don't feel safe, welcome, honored or supported in school, as well as the benefits - for all students - when every student has what she needs to thrive in school and beyond. We look forward to working with the Committee and the Coalition to modify the bill further to ensure that work on social and ethnic equity progresses in Vermont in a manner that reflects both the importance and the complexity of this task.