

Message from Commissioner Richard H. Cate

The topic of tonight's conversation is connected to Vermont's most important resource – our children. The vast majority of Vermont children participate in our education system. I have asked you here tonight to talk about the governance of that system. **Think of governance as how we structure, administer and operate our education system.** The easiest way to think about education governance may be to think about how it is structured in your local community. Think about:

- The physical boundaries of your local school district
- Where the students in your community attend school
- Your local school board
- Your union high school board (if there is one)
- Your supervisory union board (if there is one)
- Your superintendent
- The principal(s) in your school(s)

Purpose: I will be making recommendations on this topic to the State Board of Education, the Legislature and the Governor by December of this year. I will use your input to inform my recommendations. I also want to provide a forum for Vermonters to come together to discuss this important issue in their communities.

Vermont Data: Vermont's education governance system is different from that of almost any other state. Our system includes:

- 96,000 students
- 280 school districts (each with a school board with 3 to 14 members)
- 311 public schools (each with a principal)
- 46 supervisory unions (each with a superintendent and a supervisory union board made up of representatives from each of the member school boards)
- 12 supervisory districts
- 2 interstate districts where the superintendent is employed by a school board located in New Hampshire.

A limited number of towns in Vermont do not operate schools, and therefore tuition all of their students to other schools. Another small group of districts operate more than one school. However, most Vermont school districts include only one school and are part of a supervisory union.

Supervisory Unions: A supervisory union provides services to school districts, including special education, business management and curriculum development and coordination. The supervisory union board is made up of members appointed by each of the local school boards. The number of school districts in a supervisory union ranges from two to 13, with the largest supervisory union board composed of over 40 members. In a supervisory union, the supervisory union board hires a superintendent. After being hired, the superintendent then essentially works for each of the local school boards, dedicating a portion of time to the needs of each district (See *Education Governance in Vermont* chart, attached). Each local school board hires the school principal(s) and teachers. Although the superintendents generally work closely with the principals to create a unified approach to serving the needs of students, the differing priorities of the school boards can result in very different outcomes for the students.

Supervisory Districts: The boundaries of the 12 supervisory districts are, in fact, school district boundaries (e.g. Burlington and Hartford). Supervisory districts are essentially school districts that employ their own superintendent and are not part of a supervisory union. In these districts there is only one school board, which appoints both the superintendent and the principal(s) (See *Education Governance in Vermont* chart, attached). In these districts, because the superintendent and the principals report to only one board, the policy direction is generally clearer. The governance structure of supervisory districts aligns more closely with that of a private sector company.

My Proposal: In May of last year, I wrote a paper on education governance that initiated the process in which you are participating. Based on nearly 20 years of observation, I outlined a model which addresses the effects of different governance issues, including the quality of education and the shortage of candidates for superintendent, school board and principal positions. The model outlines the following fundamental changes to Vermont's education governance structure (See *Vermont Education Governance Model*, attached, for an example):

- The number of school districts in Vermont would be reduced from 280 to 58.
- The new school district boundaries would align with the existing supervisory union and school district boundaries.
- The supervisory unions would cease to exist.
- School boards would consist of one member elected from each municipality/pre-existing school district within the new school district boundaries, with weighted voting to address the one-person one-vote legal requirement (weighted by population). Each board would have a minimum of five members.
- The school board of each district would appoint a superintendent.
- The superintendent, with the consent of the school board, would appoint the principals of the schools and the other administrators in the district.
- This structure would be similar to that in most public, private and non-profit organizations that have boards.

I offered this governance model to stimulate conversation. This model is certainly not the only possibility. For more information on the issues we face today and why I see the need for a change to the education governance structure, see the attached rationale entitled "*Why Education Governance? Why now?*" For a copy of the governance white paper, or to find other information about this topic, including the schedule of meetings around the state, please visit <http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/dept/governance.html>. If you have comments either about governance or this process, please send a message to governance@list.education.state.vt.us or FAX to 802-828-3140, attention "Jill", or via postal mail to Education Governance Comment, c/o Jill Remick, Department of Education, 120 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05620-2501.

Thank you again for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this process.

Sincerely,



Richard H. Cate, Commissioner

Why Education Governance? Why Now?

Quality of Education: Vermont has a number of very small school districts. Although there are advantages to small schools, there are often disadvantages associated with very small school districts. Very small school districts are constrained by the number of students and the amount of money available to educate them. They simply cannot provide the educational opportunities to students that larger districts can. Regardless of whether governance changes occur, Vermont will never have large schools or school districts in comparison to other states. Our population, the size of the state, and our topography will ensure that does not happen.

I often hear from teachers and administrators that **students from different elementary schools come to high school with differing levels of preparation**. School districts have different levels of resources and educational priorities, which result in students being prepared for high school at varying levels. If the number of school districts is reduced, there would be a high school in almost every district, with a school board that is responsible for education from grades pre-kindergarten to 12.

Cost of Education: The primary cost driver in Vermont's education system is **the pupil-teacher ratio, which is the lowest in the country**. This ratio is primarily a result of our small schools and small school districts. Again, Vermont would not, nor should it, have a pupil-teacher ratio that adversely affects the quality of education. Vermont's *School Quality Standards* set the maximum number of students at 20 in an elementary classroom and 25 in a high school classroom. These levels are educationally appropriate but substantially higher than our current average of approximately 13 students.

Under my proposed governance model, **school boards would have the opportunity to determine how best to use teachers and school buildings**. For example, two small school districts, each with a single school, say K-6 or K-8, would now be part of the same district. If the needs of students and the topography allowed, the grade configuration in these schools could be changed. One school could educate K-4 students and the other could serve students in grades 5-8. This would provide an opportunity for school districts to increase their pupil-teacher ratios, reduce cost, and expand educational opportunities for students. This reduction would not occur immediately, but over a few years this could be accomplished through attrition. Because school districts would include multiple schools, boards could look at the capacity of adjacent schools when deciding where to invest in facility upgrades and replacements.

Student Enrollment: Today, Vermont has essentially the same number of school-age students we had 170 years ago. Enrollment has cycled up and down between 90,000 and 105,000 over the past 30 years. The number is approximately 96,000 today. **For the last few years, there has been a decline in enrollment, thereby increasing our per-pupil costs**, which is the most commonly used measure of the cost of education. This often results in conversations in communities about whether to continue to operate because of increased per-pupil cost. As noted above, school districts with more than one school may be able to keep small schools open and operating at a cost communities can afford. Some people argue that consolidating the governance of school districts will result in the closure of small schools. However, one reason I am proposing a change in governance is my concern that **some of our small schools will not survive under our current system of governance**.

Shortage of Qualified School Leader Candidates: The number of qualified principal and superintendent candidates has declined significantly over the past several years. Several school

boards also report that there are fewer school board candidates as well. I believe that much of this shortage can be attributed to the job demands of these positions. Volunteer school board members have many demands imposed upon them, and it is often difficult in small communities to find enough people who can dedicate the necessary time to the work of the schools. Superintendents in supervisory unions report to several school boards (the highest is 14). Therefore, much of their time is dedicated to preparing for, attending and following up on board meetings. The rest of their time is split between the needs of different school districts, some of whom may have conflicting priorities. Principals, who report jointly to their school board and their superintendent, also spend much of their time focused on issues that are the subject of board meetings, and are not necessarily related to the ongoing educational needs of their students.

The proposed governance model would **simplify the work of all school leaders and clarify reporting responsibilities**. There would be a larger population from which to draw school board candidates. Superintendents would report and be accountable to only one board and could dedicate much more time to the educational needs of students and the mentoring needs of principals. Principals, who would now be reporting to only the superintendent and would not necessarily have to attend board meetings, could dedicate their full attention to their students and the operation of their building.

Other Public Comment Opportunities

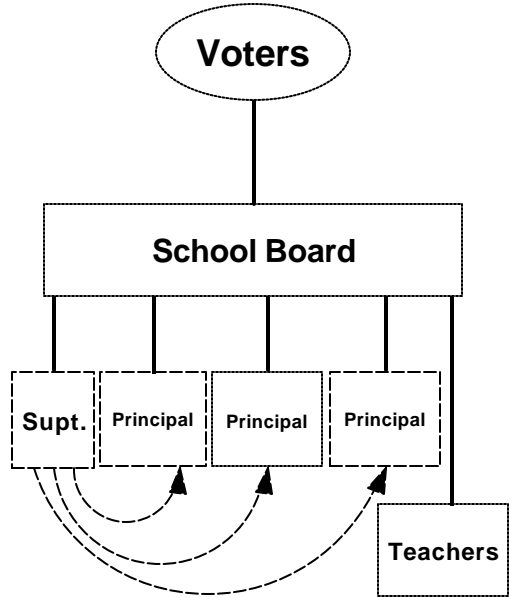
Public comment on Vermont's education governance system can be made via e-mail to governance@list.education.state.vt.us, via FAX at (802) 828-3140 or via postal mail at:

Education Governance Public Comment, c/o Jill Remick
Vermont Department of Education
120 State Street 4th Floor
Montpelier, VT 05620-2501

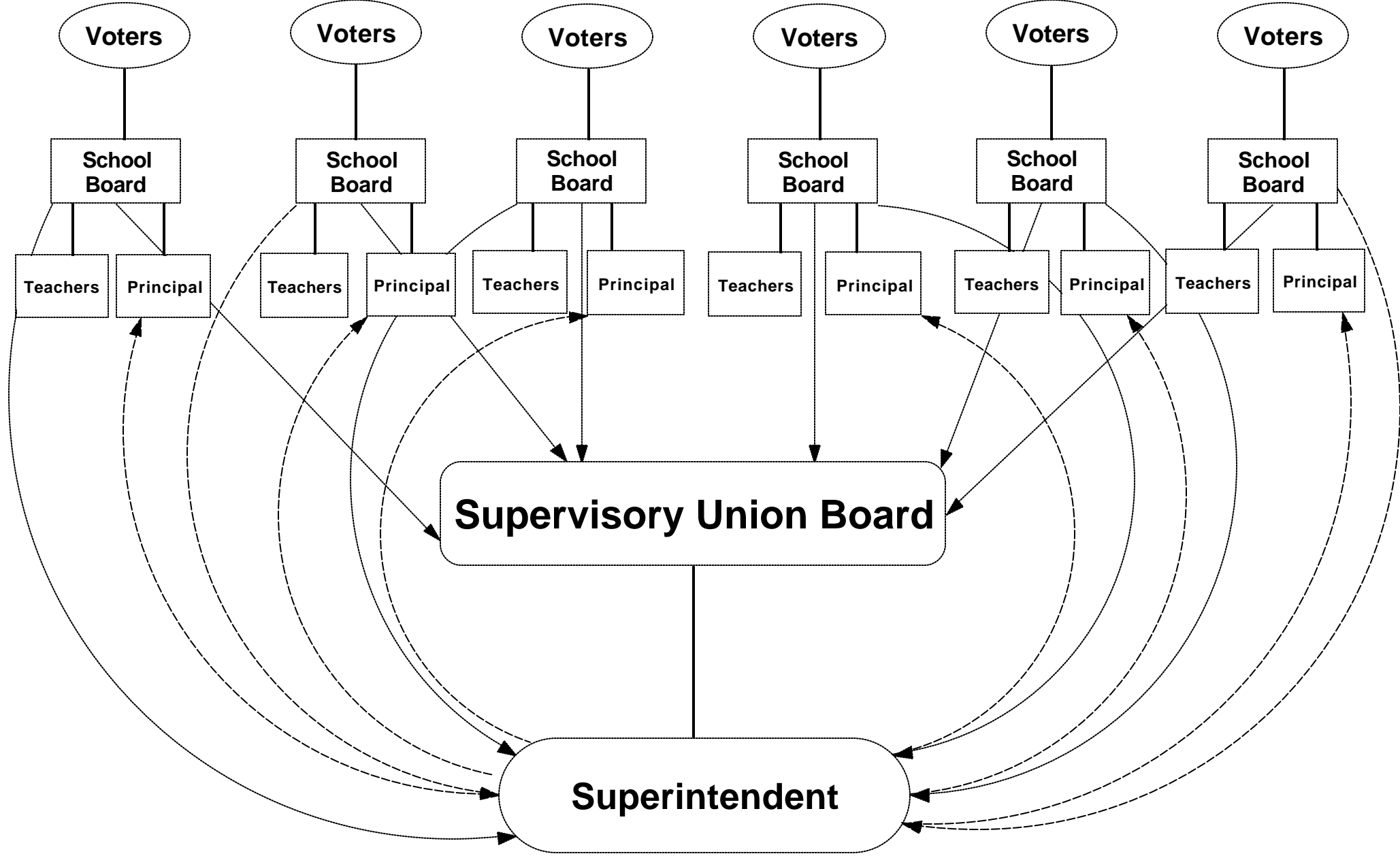
Thank you!

Education Governance in Vermont

Typical Supervisory District



Typical Supervisory Union



Vermont Education Governance Model

Typical Model School District

