

Vermont State Board of Education, Rutland, May 17, 2023

Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA

I would like to respond to your vote to exempt private schools that receive public funds from the rewritten Education Quality Standards.

As a board you have made it clear that you don't see the need to hold private schools to the same high standards required of public schools by Act 1.

We are concerned that by exempting approved private schools from the mandate to provide an education that is substantially equal, it has also exempted these schools from providing an education that is equitable, anti-racist, culturally responsive, anti-discriminatory, and inclusive. One could argue that you have effectively sanctioned a separate but unequal education system for a significant number of Vermont students outside our public schools. In doing so, it will expose these students to a higher risk of inequitable and discriminatory treatment and substandard curricular requirements and teaching practices.

The new education quality standards are the result of more than two years of evaluation and discussion by the Act 1 Working Group, a diverse group of stakeholders charged by the legislature and Gov. Phil Scott to eradicate racial bias and to ensure that the standards are inclusive, anti-racist, equitable, and culturally responsive. The legislation creating the working group also directed that the revised education quality standards apply to all schools receiving public money. All but one member of the working group agreed with the law; the lone dissent was the Vermont Independent Schools Association. The state board, in voting to exempt private schools from the standards, appears to be not respecting the letter and intent of the law.

The board is essentially telling private schools that they can keep taking lots of public money, but they don't have to meet the same high standards as public schools. What's even more troubling is that private schools don't have to ensure that students of all ancestries and social groups feel safe, respected, and welcome.

As a lifelong Vermonter who attended Vermont public schools, graduated from the University of Vermont, and went on to teach in Vermont schools for 31 years, I am well aware of the excellent reputation our four historic academies have for providing rigorous academic programs for Vermont students. We used to refer to them as public-private institutions, because they have always been integral to our public school system and the public good in the communities they serve. We have no doubt that they all have been responsive to the shifts in our view of history and social justice and have adjusted their academic programs accordingly. While having the Education Quality Standards apply to them might add a layer of accountability, it will not mandate any severe changes in their current programs.