

July 22, 2024

Dear Commission Chair Roy and Members:

We are writing with preliminary observations and recommendations concerning the important work of the new Commission on the Future of Education in Vermont. All of us were online participants at the initial organizing meeting of the Commission on July 15.

While short, the meeting was clear and constructive. A positive tone was set, including your emphasis on developing an authentic process for public engagement beyond simply holding meetings in all counties in the state. We appreciate your commitment to public comment, adjusting the agenda to still allow for ten minutes for people to speak. We also appreciate that you encouraged people to write you with suggestions and testimony, and you welcomed the many comments and suggestions that were posted in the Chat function of the meeting via Microsoft Teams. We heard you say that all the comments in the Chat will be retained as part of the public record of the Commission's work. That is appropriate and commendable.

We recognize and appreciate that the Commission's work is being undertaken within the guiding principles of Open Meeting Law. The newest application of the law, effective July 1, requires that all meetings be hybrid and recorded for public access. The law applies not just to the Commission but to the Steering Committee and any subcommittees. The law creating the Commission requires all testimony and comments throughout the process to be included in the final report. We applaud this commitment to transparency and accountability, both of which are foundational to this work.

The role of the Steering Committee has emerged as critical since it will be filtering and framing the bulk of the recommendations that the full Commission will consider. It is essential that the Steering Committee's meetings and any subcommittee meetings be warned and communicated broadly to ensure broad-based community participation in effective ways.

We have a significant concern about lack of diversity in the Commission's membership. It is not just a lack of geographic diversity, which is obvious by this map.



There are no front-line educators, no principals, no teachers, no parents, no students, no disenfranchised. Given that lack of diversity, it is all the more important that you make a real effort to listen to people throughout the state, and create opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Here are specific suggestions concerning the work of the Steering Committee to develop a draft work plan:

1. **Conduct a statewide listening tour.** It is an essential element of the work. Do this before you make any recommendations. Include small towns, not just large population centers for meeting locations.
2. **Define the terms and criteria you are using from the start.** What does equity mean? What is a small school? What criteria will you use to evaluate efficiency, effectiveness, and positive outcomes?
3. **Engage independent evaluators to assess the effectiveness and outcomes associated with the implementation of relevant law, including Act 46.** The evaluation should be comprehensive and conducted by a research team, not a consultant. It should be a thorough and independent evaluation of how the law worked and didn't in the real world. Did the law meet its goals? Were there really cost savings and positive educational outcomes? What harms were caused?
4. **Engage and communicate with the public.** How will information be solicited from every school and community in the state? What format can be used in every town to solicit the kind of information the commission needs? How can technology be used effectively to gather input?
5. **Evaluate strengths as well as weaknesses.** What do Vermonters see as the strengths of our public education system? How do we recommend changes that build on our strengths as a state and not undermine them?

Concerning logistics, you are already aware that the sound quality was not adequate for all Commission members to be heard by the online participants. We believe you will work to ensure that the audio as well as video aspects are managed effectively.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations.

Respectfully,

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