



# Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont Public Input Session

December 2, 2024, 5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

**Middlebury Union High School Library**  
**73 Charles Avenue, Middlebury, VT 05753**  
**Virtual via Microsoft Teams**  
**Call In: 1-802-828-7667**  
**Conference ID: 758 636 780#**

## DRAFT MEETING MINUTES

**Commission Members Present:** **Meagan Roy**, Chair; **Peter Conlon**, Representative Addison-2 District; **Ann Cummings**, (virtual) Senator Washington District; **Jennifer Deck Samuelson**, State Board of Education; **Nicole Mace**, Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA); **Oliver Olsen**, Vermont Independent Schools Association; **John Castle**, Vermont Rural Education Collaborative; **Michael Lechliter**, Vermont Superintendents Association; **Jeff Fannon**, VT-National Education Association; **Jay Nichols**, Vermont Principals' Association; **Elizabeth Jennings**, VT Association of School Business Officials.

**AOE:** Rose Neddo, Jill Briggs-Campbell, Suzanne Sprague, Maureen Gaidys.

**Others:** Bud Myers, j z, Josh and Meghan Dishaw, Kristen Toy, Mary Gemignani, Sarita Austin, Megan Sutton, Lyle Jepson, G and J Zieger, Kelsey Eberly, 802-771-7070, Joanna Doria, Matthew Duquette, Jason Chance, 802-558-2977, Amy Cole, 802-989-0886, Chester Telegraph, 802-349-3262, Adrienne MacIntyre, Liz Curry, Martha Braithwaite, SE, Bob Church, Erin Davis, Becca, Kristen Olmstead, Elsie, Pat Bradley, Gabe, Tim Berthiaume, Erin Robinson, Mary Heather Noble, Jeff Francis, Ali, Levin Christie, Kim C., .

### **Call to Order, Welcome, Overview of the Evening**

Chair Roy called the meeting to order at 5:03 p.m. and took roll call: Roy, Deck Samuelson, Olsen, Conlon, Nichols, Jennings, Castle, Lechliter, Mace, Fannon, and Cummings.

Chair Roy welcomed the group, shared the session goals and said this was meant to be an informal conversation. She also said Community Access Television would be recording this meeting.

### **Current Education Context in Vermont**

Chair Roy shared this [Information and Input Session Presentation](#) and spoke to the duties of the Commission, Commission Charge, Policy Considerations, Commission Deliverables, Guiding Principles, Workplan Framework, Subcommittees, and Communication and

## Engagement.

### *Input Questions:*

What are the strengths of public education in Vermont? What are some of the challenges of our current system? What suggestions do you have for the Commission?

- Coming from a rural state (VA) where education is actually supported was good – science based on inquiry is baked into the Vermont system; hope that we can make this not a political process – and that the Commission is focused primarily on the impact on students and not just the dollars.
- Kids love going to school and didn't want to miss a day; credit 99% of that to the teachers; high quality educators who love what they do is important; my goal as a parent is to support the teachers; state shows that support.; elementary school experience was smaller, but it can be difficult when small classes become too small.
- Tension between state needs/expectations and local control and that has been going on forever; also tension between district expectations and teacher latitude; critical thinking takes time and involves small group work
- Inclusivity and social-emotional learning (SEL) needs; school becomes a community.
- Having too much pre-prepared lesson plans so that exploratory learning is stunted; some programs are quite pricey; need to look carefully at what we are doing and not always think there is something better; give programs a chance to prove themselves.
- What is working is the small rural schools and the transportation; the local community schools; having come from CT and MA then NY, this is the first time that he's heard/seen of kids being excited and not wanting to miss a day of school.
- Very dedicated staff navigating many challenges, communities that care, ability to leverage different learning environments.
- Vermont has escaped the label of board members being one party or another and have good people running; worried about this changing, it's a trap and that is a difficult place to get out of.
- Looked at curriculum and content standards in the Education Quality Standards (EQS) – teaching about other ethnic groups and that would never happen in any other state; we have breadth and richness and a solid anchor here.
- Decisions for education quality should be data driven; if the Commission could be transparent about the data they are using, that would be helpful for the public.
- Education finance system –wanted to emphasize that our model has equity built in at the fundamental level of how it is funded; challenges are on the tax side; at its core

what we are trying to do is an important way to think about what it means that people have the right to a quality education.

### **Current Context - Statutory Responsibility for Public Education**

Fannon referenced this [Information and Input Session Presentation](#) and spoke to the statutory responsibility and authority for education in Vermont.

#### *Input Questions*

What are some of the challenges of our current delivery system?  
What ideas do you have to address these?

- Tension between teacher training needs and the easy fix of a package curriculum; all that factors into resources, time and training. Ideas – whole different design of a school day, longer school day, more teacher training time.
- Problem is in educating the public; this is not a linear issue; needs to be addressed structurally whether a small or large school district; been lucky to have passed budgets here but not sure that is because people understand it better here; that is a real challenge for school leaders.
- Municipal viewpoint – educational problem is similar to municipalities; there's a lot of replications of effort; had kids in two school districts, calendars didn't line up; huge coordination problem across the state; this is a perfect example of why school financing is so complex.
- Statewide vision for efficient education – efficiency has two components – revenue and what it is spent on; seems to be a focus on how to generate the funds; we need to come together as a state and look at what and how we are teaching; biggest challenge is making sure money is being spent efficiently; need evidence and data base to guide innovation; this is too big a job for one district; consider looking at what we are asking schools to do and how they will do it.
- Spent the last five years trying to make sure that his son's school does not close.
- Small rural schools are working; frustrating the challenges of being a school board member, need to look hard at data from Act 46 and if it is working.
- Challenge of schools being asked to provide services that have not been part of what schools deliver and all that requires resources and money; need to re-evaluate schools in this new age.
- We have excellent schools and what makes them excellent is the teachers and administrators that create these communities; health insurance costs for teachers rise by double digits every year, and that out strain on the system; state should figure out how to help bring these costs down.

- Very prescriptive literacy program in elementary school; that kind of teaching does not fit well with about 1/3 of the students because it is repetitive, and the attention span is not there; it also takes the creativity out of teaching.
- With math, there was a shift when there was no curriculum and there was autonomy and then there was a packaged curriculum that was supposed to be taught with fidelity; if you are moving at a set speed and not engaging with the individual thinker in front of you, you will lose them, and they will need remediation.
- Curriculum teacher who noted success would be when both classrooms (AP and remedial) were teaching the same thing on the same day; will lose teachers when you tell them specifically what to do.
- Curriculum can be too rigid; can't go too far into creativity that we are not using a research-based methods.
- Curious if health care falls within the scope of the Commission; continued rising health care costs will ruin the education system eventually.
- Should health care costs be de-coupled from the funding of education?
- Idea – definition of what is a school; educators are doing so much more than just school; what is something else that could fill some of these other non-education roles?
- Interacting with the community on what to do with school buildings and how to meet all needs.
- Mission creep that requires skills that teachers are not trained for; co-locations of services that hopefully doesn't increase the education budget; that umbrella is already holding so much.
- Meals that schools are now serving; there is a cost to that, and someone must be paying; some schools buying breakfasts and lunch; service shifting.

## **Vermont's Current Education Finance System**

### Local Decision-Making – Shared Costs

Olsen and Nichols referenced this [Information and Input Session Presentation](#) and provided an overview of Vermont's Finance System and spoke to the FY 25 budget challenges and cost drivers.

#### *Input Questions:*

What questions do you have about the finance system? What suggestions do you have about the finance system?

- What impact did the pandemic have on the Common Level Appraisal (CLA)? Trying to compare apples to apples. Nonresidential property tax rates are set at one rate across the state. CLA affects both residential and non-residential properties.
- With the complexity of our system, it is time to de-couple education spending from property taxes; have it based on income as that is progressive; homestead rebate is complicated and a year in arrears; it is hard to educate people on a system so complex – it needs to be simplified.
- School districts at the upper end of costs per pupil suffer potentially when we must meet the mean/average - worry that will mediocritizing the delivery of education.
- Nothing of this is simple; not asking Commission to come up with solutions; Commission could be very impactful; invite the Commission to think about VT-NEA's recommendations to change the funding system; haven't done well but could – look at the financial implications of mergers and consolidation; in the big picture worry that we are moving too fast.
- Important to appreciate the three flavors of consolidation: governance, elementary school, and high school.
- Worry that there is a strong wind at the legislature to make a change and we need to be thoughtful and understand the data.
- We should start from the point of view of how we can better serve our students; superintendents and administrators are frugal and do their best to provide for their students; maybe Act 60 has outlived its usefulness; can we design a type of foundation formula that improves equity and is easy to understand; can we design one that improves equity and doesn't violate the Brigham decision.
- Based on the income of the average Vermonter, we have the most expensive cost per pupil in the nation; outcomes are above the median and that is the concern of the outsider.
- Property values increasing doesn't correlate with ability to pay more but increase in income does have a more direct correlation with ability to pay more; CLA works if property values are not changing much in any given year; finding ways to eliminate how that part of how our system works; if cannot replace the CLA system, then should revamp it; experience with foundation formula was not equitable.
- Open up an income-based tax and have it more generalized, might save some smaller schools, having a larger catchment area.
- Hearing from one side that closing schools never saves money and the other side saying closing schools definitely saves money; show me the numbers – in the three

categories; why can we not get that data?

- Hopes the Commission is bold with their recommendations – none of this is easy and no decision will be popular with everyone; opportunity to make a dramatic change.
- If you cannot understand something, it is very hard to care about it; this district has been fortunate to pass budgets; there is an incentive to spend less, but is there also an incentive to spend more?
- With the last budget cycle, the very people that the weighting study was supposed to benefit, still voted down their budget; it didn't work as we had hoped.

### **Next Steps**

Chair Roy spoke about continuing communication and public engagement; that the work plan will continue to be refined, and the preliminary cost containment recommendations will continue to evolve.

### **What Else?**

- That these public input sessions are wider; we do not always hear from English Language Learner (ELL) families, poor families, unhoused families – their voices should be desperately sought, not just the people that are well-connected and wealthy.
- Data on the financial impact and impact on students' achievement. For equity focus, can agree on the criteria for student equity; the per pupil spending equity is a concern statewide and with newly consolidated districts.

Chair Roy thanked all participants and Middlebury High School for hosting. She agreed that the Commission has potential to be impactful and added that it needs to deliver.

### **Adjourn**

Chair Roy adjourned the meeting at 6:53 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Maureen Gaidys.