

## Commission on the Future of Public Education

### Input/Reflections/Comments to the Steering Committee

I felt the first Steering Committee meeting was very authentic. ...though a bit challenging at times to work through the complexity of this work, there was lots of genuine input from the group in working through the process and forward movement. This is going to be messy work and a tough balance providing structure and focus, while allowing for open input from the group. Makes sense to me that the chair of the Commission also chairs the steering committee—although I understand the ambiguity in the way the legislation was written. Thank you for all of your added responsibility to lead this work and thank you to those on the Steering Committee for their additional time commitment.

—We do need to create a shared understanding of our current landscape, thus the need for a wide range of data and information regarding the status of education in Vermont is so necessary. . . .I was glad to hear some ask for positive info and qualitative data. I think we may also need some guidance on how to review things like statewide assessments—outcome data to assess effectiveness without the demographic variables of particular school communities can be misleading. Yes, we should be concerned with both outcomes and opportunities, but be cautious of what is often measured via large scale assessments. We should remember that not all that is measured is important (or valid) and not all that is important is measured. We should use a holistic lens about learning or the design of learning(curriculum, instruction & assessment). We will need to ensure we solicit lots of input from actual educators in this process.

—The membership of the finance committee should contain a range of experiences and perspectives. I encourage consideration of Jack Hoffman from Public Asset Institute—he is very well versed in Vermont education finance and has the analysis experience & skills.

—There is need for data and things like past studies all in one location for access from the Commission and the public.

—[Maine Study](#) This is a study of Maine's governance changes that might serve as an example of what a study on Act 46 might look like? On the data point a comprehensive evaluation of the laws especially by an effective university based research team would yield a whole bunch of data -survey data re what's working/not working on the ground would bring reality to the table as an example. I believe some folks at UVM are participating in some data collection supported by the Leahy Center—I think reaching out to them would be valuable. We should not make any recommendations on changes to education governance without a full evaluation of our current structure. There are often assumptions made about how things are working based on what the laws say and anecdotal information when in reality how things are working on the ground in different locations is vastly different. We have to be careful of one size fits all solutions that are not best for all contexts.

–No surprise that “cost containment” is a priority of our work. I suspect we will continue to hear a chorus of folks from the public singing that tune as well. I do think this issue needs to be taken up right away as there is an expectation for us to make recommendations. I also worry about being too hasty and just throwing this against the wall to see what sticks. The outside analysis of Acts 46, 173, 127 and modeling any new proposal is essential to work—we have recognize and communicate to the Legislature and public that this work will require time and not be complete before the next session gets underway. It is also hard to see how you can make recommendations for cost containment, even over the short term, without considering guiding principles and educational values.

–I think there needs to be much attention paid to managing expectations around cost containment. We are a small rural state—we don’t have an economy of scale or tax base that a more populated state might have. Think about it, costs for many things in education have risen, student outcomes and performance aren’t what they should be given the spending, and school buildings are crumbling and now we are looking to spend less or reduce the growth in spending? To some, the simple solution is to reduce staffing and operating costs and the simple way to reduce staffing and operating costs is to have fewer schools. However, there are many reasons this is not a simple solution, nor reasonable and fair given our rural communities in many cases, nor an assurance of reduced spending overall. It is important that we do not pretend we can do more with less. We may need to accept that we cannot spend as much money, but we have to be realistic that there will be things we cannot accomplish or result in unintended consequences that are actually detrimental to student wellbeing and learning.

–We need to take a deep dive into how have the revenue streams have changed over time and how have the uses changed of the Ed Fund. The expanded uses of the Ed Fund at both the state and local level has to be fully understood and openly debated by the Commission—things like early college, universal meals and at the local level things like mental health services. An area that it would be good to look at other states—are those costs incurred as education costs or are they picked up in county or state social services budgets?

–Based on some preliminary numbers—In FY2005, the split between property taxes and general fund/dedicated taxes was 61-39. For FY2025, it looks like the split will be about 64-36. That may not seem like much, but if we had the same ratio we had 20 years ago, property taxes would be \$80 million lower. Moving things to the General Fund wouldn’t reduce overall costs, but it would change who pays!

–The full Commission should adopt the first version of a Work Plan on Financial Data Collection and Analysis before the Subcommittee on Education Finance begins its work to fully understand the many fiscal issues related to Vermont’s education system. (subject to subsequent revisions based on recommendations by the Subcommittee, and further consideration by the full Commission)

–Accurate and comprehensive financial information and analysis therefore will be critical for the Commission to develop constructive recommendations. Financial issues that should be further developed through data and analysis include the following:

1. What are the financial and educational and equity strengths and weaknesses of the current Vermont education financing system?
2. What is the short term outlook for education property taxes for FY25?
3. What are the short and long-term trends for Education Fund revenue and spending?
4. How have revenue sources supporting the Education Fund changed since 1996?
5. What are the projected impacts on education property taxes, income taxes, or other revenue sources under alternative, altered revenue sources for the Education Fund?
6. What is the outlook for the “cost drivers” reported by AOE in January 2024 (health insurance, services previously funded by federal funds, staff salary and benefits, inflation), and other major spending categories?
7. What is the breakdown in terms of spending subcategories for the big “cost driver” categories?
8. What impact did the erstwhile 5% education property tax cap have on local district FY25 spending requests?
9. What impact did the new student weighting formula have on local district FY25 spending requests?
10. What is the projected impact on local district spending categories from Secs. 18 and 19 of H.887 (reinstatement of penalty on local district spending “in excess of 118% of the statewide average per pupil spending increased by inflation”)?
11. What are the major legal and regulatory requirements that impact local district spending? i.e. Activities that would not otherwise be engaged in by local districts in the normal course of education operations and programming, but for which spending increased as a result of the legal or regulatory requirement.
12. Are there credible methodologies for analyzing local district spending in major categories and subcategories?
13. Compare spending by consolidated, unified districts with unconsolidated districts, or supervisory unions?
14. Calculate the financial and educational costs and benefits from closing an elementary school: financial savings, saving options as alternatives to closing schools, financial impact of foregone educational benefits to students, particularly in rural community schools, financial and societal impact on towns where an elementary school is closed.
15. Calculate the financial and educational costs and benefits of consolidating rural school districts, compared to inter-district collaboration on administrative functions and educational programming.
16. The Commission should devote time during early meetings to seek consensus on the portion of the Work Plan that will guide financial data and analysis. Considerable technical assistance will be needed from AOE, local districts, JFO and outside consultants/researchers.