VERMONT'S EDUCATION RECOVERY

Framework and Overview

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Background

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Scott declared a State of Emergency one year ago, in March 2020. This involved initial closure of all K-12 schools during March 2020, planning for and maintaining continuity of learning remotely during April to June 2020, and successfully implementing a unique fall reopening paradigm in September 2020. Throughout each of these phases of education operations during the pandemic, Vermont's educators and local systems have consistently adjusted to come through for students, families, and the state. School personnel have strived to maintain healthy practices consistent with state guidance, have developed creative and novel ways to educate, feed, and care for students across a number of different instructional dispositions (i.e., in-person, hybrid, and fully remote), and have developed support systems on the fly to assist students during this challenging time. Indeed, the efforts of our local education systems are part of the reason that Vermont has fared comparatively better than other states in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. These ongoing and successful efforts are also why we can now begin planning for what Vermont's education system will look like in the months and years ahead.

Engaging in recovery planning is not an indictment of School Districts and Supervisory Unions' (SU/SDs)education operations during the past several months. The work is not meant to suggest that educators or SU/SDs have failed at educating our students during the pandemic. Indeed, as referenced above, the success of our education system is what allows us to move on with this next important step towards full recovery from the pandemic. We know that teachers, staff, and administrators are tired, and we know that they are doing their absolute best to meet student and community needs. However, we also all know that despite our best, heroic efforts we have collectively been unable to prevent a negative impact on some students and families. It is in this spirit that the AOE provides a vision and process for statewide Education Recovery moving forward.

In Vermont's Constitution, the state bears the responsibility for ensuring that all students have equitable access to education. Accordingly, a core goal of recovery planning is to reduce equity gaps in access, opportunities, and outcomes resulting from the pandemic. Here are a few points why this is a critical endeavor:

- Experts believe that existing equity gaps have widened (both in terms of academic outcomes and psychosocial adjustment indicators; Shafer, 2020; 2021 VT pediatrician survey)[i] [ii].
- The impact of SU/SD pandemic response (e.g., remote learning) likely varies by factors such as region (rural versus suburban), community resources and characteristics, existing pre-pandemic practices, quality of implementation, and individual student and family characteristics.
- It is important to acknowledge that some students have excelled, improved, or even thrived in this new learning environment. This may be due to greater creativity and flexibility in local approaches that perhaps better meet the needs of some students. Consideration of how to continue such approaches moving forward is warranted.

Overview of the Recovery Process

As we look toward a future when much of our adult population in Vermont is vaccinated, it is necessary to plan for what education will look like after the pandemic. Overall, this planning process will take the form of:

1. Assessing need at the local level, using readily available information and data,
2. Creating an action plan to meet that local need,
3. Executing initial implementation of the action plan, and
4. Tuning and refining the plan over time.

A team comprised of AOE staff and other relevant state personnel will be assigned to each SU/SD to increase local capacity, provide support and assistance, and streamline recovery efforts.

General Requirements for Supervisory Union/School District Recovery Planning

SU/SDs will be required to:

- Establish a supervisory union/school district Recovery Team (RT), focusing on a proactive approach for each of the three outcome areas.
- Appoint a supervisory union/school district Recovery Coordinator (RC) to manage the RT and serve as the main liaison for state-provided recovery resources.
- The major responsibility of the RT is to assess and address student need regarding three key recovery areas (discussed below and see Recovery 1-pager).
- Develop a local recovery plan that details the SU/SD's approach, including partnerships with relevant local entities (link to recovery plan template.)
- Leverage four critical levers under Act 173, as identified by AOE, as part of assessing need, and creating and executing an action plan.
- Complete the AOE QuickScan tool to assess SU/SD capacity regarding four systemic levers above. SU/SDs may share this information with their AOE team to help us better tailor state supports.
- Build on continuous improvement work required for regular federal funding.

State Supports

During the planning process, each SU/SD will have a team of state support personnel at its disposal. These personnel will assist the SU/SD in designing and implementing their recovery plan. More information on the structure and role of state support teams will be provided.
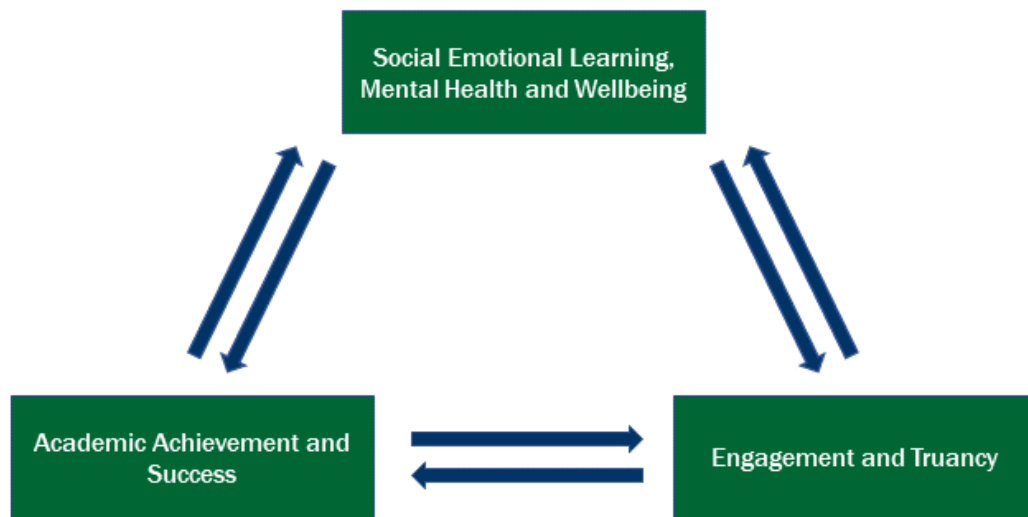
Outcome Areas for Recovery

Central to Vermont's recovery planning and success is ensuring that all students, especially our most vulnerable students, are attended to across a variety of areas. Based on what we currently know about the likely impact of COVID-19, as well as the core underpinnings necessary for students' optimal growth and success, our state education recovery plan focuses on three areas:

1. social emotional functioning, mental health, and well-being,

2. student engagement, and
3. academic achievement and success.

In practice, these areas are overlapping and interconnected. However, it is important to identify and work on each separately to assure that we adequately assess student need and implement plans to address that need in all three areas. Ensuring that local systems are shored up for meeting all three areas of need is the best way to achieve long-term successful student outcomes.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Three Areas of Focus for Recovery.

Area 1: Social Emotional Health, Mental Health, and Well-being

This includes students' internalizing and externalizing challenges, both inside and outside the classroom, as well as nutrition, physical health, and family functioning. The pandemic ushered in significant stress and isolation for many families, as well as financial strain and the loss of loved ones. Consider the following patterns regarding impact in this area:

- Anxiety and depression were already on the rise in the student population prior to COVID-19.[iii]
- Anxiety and depression rates have risen in both teens and children, corresponding with the timing of the pandemic.[iv]
- Medical emergency departments have witnessed an increase in visits by young people for mental health related issues, including increased suicidal ideation.[v]
- Older students appear to be struggling more[vi] perhaps because education disruptions are increasingly high stakes the closer one gets to high school graduation.
- SU/SDs have seen an increase in 504 plans for students who have documented disabilities.[vii]

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- Vermont pediatricians report an increase in poor nutrition, eating disorders, lack of sleep, and reduced physical activity with COVID-19.[viii]
- The social emotional and mental health impact of recovery on educators and local systems personnel has been profound.
- Some students are doing well in the current learning setup. We need to ensure they have what they need moving forward as well.

Suggested SU/SD Activities

- Partner with regional Designated Agencies (DAs) for mental health and related services, private clinicians, community agencies, and pediatricians to develop a robust referral and treatment system at local/regional level.
- Survey/screen students before they return in fall, to be fully prepared for their arrival.
- Leverage ESSER funds to hire appropriate staffing, such as school-based clinicians, social workers, community liaisons, community outreach personnel, etc. Given regional and statewide staffing shortages, think creatively about who can carry out the work (e.g., do they really need to be a licensed educator or mental health clinician?). Similarly, consider expanding recruitment methods beyond SU/SD's typical postings.
- Prioritize training of all staff to recognize signs of mental health distress.
- Develop school and district response plans for mental health crisis.
- Incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) into core curriculum and involve all staff in this work.

AOE and State Resources

- Provide sample memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and agreements for collaborative work with DAs, community partners, private clinicians, pediatricians, youth service bureaus, etc.
- Provide guidance and technical assistance (TA) on developing and operating district-level Recovery Team, including recommended roles and responsibilities.
- Provide free online platform with vetted and curated SEL curricular materials.
- Provide exemplars, guidance, and TA, in partnership with Department of Mental Health (DMH) and other partners, regarding well-being screening and associated tools.
- Offer statewide Data Literacy program to assist SU/SDs in appropriately interpreting local mental health and well-being data and using it to identify aligned instructional and other improvement strategies.
- Provide TA on leveraging existing and emergency federal funding to support SU/SD efforts.

Area 2: Student Engagement and Truancy

This includes ensuring that all students are fully engaged in learning and academic progress, regardless of the extent to which they experienced remote or in-person learning during the pandemic. This area deserves special recognition due to:

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- National and regional concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on motivation, absenteeism, truancy, and disconnection with school.[ixx] This is particularly problematic for our most vulnerable students, who often rely every day on the structure, safety and support that school provides.
- Patterns in Vermont suggesting that many students have been "lost" during the pandemic response, with SU/SD and school staff having tremendous difficulty remaining in contact with and connecting with some students and families.[xi]

Recovery efforts should attend to patterned truancy, framed not from a punitive approach but by leveraging community partnerships and collaborative local systems.

Suggested SU/SD Activities

- Hire personnel or contract with community partners to locate and connect with students and families, including door-to-door outreach if needed.
- Partner with local Division of Children and Families (DCF) office, District Attorney's office, and/or other community organizations to develop a more robust referral and wraparound process, envisioning court action only as a last resort.
- Develop a plan that includes identification of why student is truant/disengaged, including use of functional behavior analysis, developmental concerns (e.g., younger versus older student), etc.
- Develop individualized plan for re-engagement/re-entry for each student.

AOE and State Resources

- Provide materials on model programs, exemplar agreements, and roles and responsibilities for optimal truancy reduction and re-engagement efforts.
- Provide on-going guidance and TA on plans for identifying, connecting with, and re-engaging truant and/or disengaged students.
- Leverage state-level partnerships with DCF and DMH to ensure optimal use of local resources, including both fiscal and personnel resources.
- Offer statewide Data Literacy program to assist districts in appropriately interpreting local student engagement data and using it to identify aligned improvement strategies
- Provide technical assistance on leveraging existing and emergency federal funding to support SU/SD efforts.

Area 3: Academic Achievement and Success

This includes both identifying the extent to which any students have fallen behind due to the pandemic as well as identifying students who have excelled within the new instructional paradigm. In terms of potential impact of the pandemic:

- Data in Vermont indicate many students are struggling academically in the context of COVID-19. [xii] A recent survey by Vermont Principals' Association of its members revealed that 74% of respondents (total respondents = 68) reported students were doing worse off or much worse off academically than normal.

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- National and state evidence suggests that existing equity gaps are widening between historically marginalized and non-marginalized students because of COVID-19.[xiii]
- Older students might be struggling more given the increased demand for self-motivation and discipline inherent to hybrid and remote learning paradigms.
- Preliminary evidence indicates potential differences in which arenas of academic performance may have been affected most (e.g., math versus ELA). [xiv]
- Some students are doing well academically within the novel paradigms created to address the pandemic.

Overall, some type of individualized plan for all students can likely assist in their academic recovery and maintenance of progress. In addition, students who qualify for IEP or 504 plans may require specialized services and supports, based on their individual situation.

Suggested SU/SD Activities

- Using ongoing formative and summative data collection, assess progress or loss in (at minimum) both math and literacy, within each grade level. Disaggregate data by specific student subgroups, to the extent practicable, to better understand patterns and tailor interventions.
- Develop a plan for integrating the work of your SU/SD Recovery Team with ongoing academic work in the local education system.
- Develop a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) for each student that addresses how they will get back on track, or continue their success to date, including what supports and experiences the SU/SD and school will provide.
- Use key support personnel to work directly with students and/or assist universal teaching approaches that simultaneously combine remediation and introduction of new material to students.
- Develop a plan to assess and monitor each student's progress via daily TA, assigned counselor, etc.
- Leverage existing online learning options, including individualized learning platforms such as School of One or similar program, existing Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative (VTVLC) options deployed during the pandemic, etc. to get students back on track and keep them fully engaged in their instruction.
- Consider high-dosage, high-quality tutoring to assist students in making progress.
- Leverage summer programming to assist students who require additional supports.

AOE and State Resources

- Provide materials on model instruction paradigms, data literacy, and related topics.
- Provide TA on leveraging existing and emergency federal funding to support SU/SD efforts.
- Provide exemplar models for supporting academic success, specifically tailored to post-COVID-19 recovery.

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- On-going guidance and TA regarding Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and leveraging systemic supports for academic success.
- Provide access to and training in use of the existing formative assessment tools available to SU/SDs.
- Support SU/SDs in understanding how to use interim assessments to inform individualized, school-level, and SU/SD-level instructional planning.
- Offer statewide Data Literacy program to assist districts in appropriately interpreting local academic data and using it to identify aligned instructional and other improvement strategies.

Ongoing AOE Support for Recovery

In partnership with other state agencies, the AOE will provide the following ongoing supports:

- Each SU/SD will be assigned its own state assistance team.
- Recovery framework to guide local implementation and work.
- Recovery toolkit with detailed materials to assist SU/SDs.
- AOE staff review of initial recovery plan draft, if requested.
- Facilitation of community networking and conversations to build local system (i.e., DMH and DAs, DCF, others).
- Virtual SEL platform – free for all SU/SD personnel to use.
- Data literacy initiative – free for SU/SD teams, to assist SU/SDs in utilizing local data in plan development and implementation.
- Technical assistance as needed: expertise on Education Support Teams (EST), MTSS, national and state models for addressing impact of COVID-19, and best practices for braiding and maximizing federal funds.
- Additional ongoing resources as materials are finalized and state/local need becomes clear.

Note: For Recovery Plan specific requirements, timeline, and submission instructions, please refer to the [AOE Education Recovery Toolkit.](#)

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[i] Shafer, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/closing-covid-19-equity-gaps-in-schools/2020/09.

[ii] Survey administered to VT chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Academy of Family Physicians, February 2021, 38 respondents. Responses to question: "How are the children?"

[iii] Sarah Squirrell, Commissioner of Mental Health, VT School Recovery. Mental Health Impact Statements and Data. 2021.

[iv] Ibid; AAP/AAFP survey.

[v] Ibid; AAP/AAFP survey.

[vi] Vermont Principals' Association survey, 2021; AAP/AAFP survey.

[vii] Reported to State Director of Special Education during weekly virtual meetings with LEA special education directors.

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[viii] Survey administered to VT chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Academy of Family Physicians, February 2021, 38 respondents. Responses to question: "How are the children?"
[ix] https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/key-concepts-for-leveraging-chronic-absence-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/
[x] https://vtdigger.org/2020/04/13/as-schools-teach-remotely-districts-struggle-with-attendance/
[xi] Ibid; https://www.vpr.org/post/ghosted-students-disappear-vermont-classrooms-during-pandemic#stream/0
[xii] VPA Survey, administered to VPA members 2/21; AAP/AAFP survey; Testimony from Vermont School Counselors Association (VTSCA) to House Education Committee, 1/15/21.
[xiii] Kuhfeld, Soland, et al. (2020). Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. Annenberg Institute, Brown University. See xii above.
[xiv] Ibid.