

# Guidance: Education Recovery No. 1

Rev. February 26, 2021

## Background

Vermont successfully reopened its schools in the Fall of 2020. This success was a function of several variables:

1. Through the hard work and sacrifice of all Vermonters, we were able to suppress the virus to a high degree, and create conditions in our communities conducive for safely reopening our schools;
2. We designed, in cooperation with the Department of Health, stringent and comprehensive guidance for the operation of schools during these pandemic conditions; and
3. School districts developed and implemented specific district-level plans relative to the state level guidance that could ensure the safe operations of their schools.

This success can be seen in state-level testing data, the routine surveillance testing data for school staff, and the fact that over 80% of our schools have maintained some form of in-person instruction during the ever-changing conditions of viral transmission.

At the same time, however, we know the current disposition of our school system does not begin to approach its pre-COVID-19 effectiveness. Students that were at risk prior to the pandemic are no doubt more at risk now, and the emergency has been very disruptive, and the cause of heightened anxiety among many of our students.

With the advent of vaccines and the return to warmer weather, we can anticipate the conditions in our communities will start to improve significantly. This provides an opportunity to position our school system to address the impact of this emergency more directly.

We are calling this next phase, “recovery” which is a term better known in emergency management. Recovery is the phase of work that begins after the emergency is over. Although this public health emergency is not over, we can act now to prevent an educational emergency from occurring.

We define “education recovery” as mitigating the impact of this pandemic on the academic, social, and emotional well-being of our students. This guidance is the first in what will be a series of guidance documents designed to help coordinate the education recovery work across the state. Specific recovery planning information regarding issues such as Career Technical Education (CTE), special education, PreK and other topics will be forthcoming.

This recovery phase will take place in a context where staff are fatigued and experiencing considerable stress themselves. Nevertheless, we must find the energy and inspiration to “begin the end” of the pandemic on behalf of our students. It is our hope that by working together through a focused recovery process we will demonstrate that the Vermont education system has managed both the safety and educational needs of our schools better than any education system in the world.

In the early phases of the pandemic, we benefitted from the difficult experiences of other countries such as Italy at a time when no one had a good understanding of the virus and its potential impact on society. Now, it is our turn to share our expertise. Vermont, with its model management of the crisis to date, has a responsibility to be one of the first states to articulate an educational recovery plan and to lead in the practical work of helping our students recover from this emergency.

## **Education Recovery as a Partnership**

This recovery work in education will require a partnership between school districts and the state. State resources beyond educational resources will need to be deployed, so it will be important to have a common planning framework across the state. Also, it will be important to establish local and regional priorities based on this framework since the experience and impact of the emergency has been varied. This prioritization will allow districts to focus their work and their resources toward a common goal.

This partnership will have two components: a district level component and a state component.

### **District Recovery Team**

Each supervisory union/district, not school, will be required to have a recovery team and a recovery coordinator. This team should be established by **March 15, 2021**. The major responsibilities of this district team will be to coordinate the local and regional recovery efforts among its schools, and to respond to state planning requirements. The district recovery coordinator will manage this work and serve as the primary point of contact to the state-level support team for the district.

### **State Support Team**

Each district will be assigned to a state support team organized by the Agency of Education. Each state support team will be assigned a group of districts in the same region of the state. The state support team will serve as the liaison with other state agencies and resources to coordinate the state response in each region. The major responsibility of a state support team is to assist district teams with responding to state planning requirements and with implementing the district-level recovery plans.

### **Student Focus Areas**

To facilitate an initial conceptualization of the recovery work, it will focus on three areas of student concern:

- Socioemotional functioning, mental health, and well-being;
- Student engagement; and
- Academic achievement and success.

These focus areas are not hierarchical; they are interdependent. They are designed to place districts in a disposition beyond traditional academics, while at the same time acknowledging that academics will be a core area of recovery work.

## Recovery Timeline

The goal of this planning initiative is for every district to understand its priority needs in each of the focus areas with initial plans on how to meet those needs in place prior to summer vacation. Districts will then be able to leverage summer activities to begin the recovery work. The following is a tentative timeline for this work.

### **Phase 1: Organization (Completed by March 15, 2021)**

A recovery team is established in each district and recovery coordinator is identified. State support teams will convene regional meetings to orient district teams to the recovery work.

### **Phase 2: Needs Assessment (Completed by April 15, 2021)**

Each district team will assess district conditions and preliminary student status in the three focus areas, using materials provided by the AOE. State support teams will assist districts with identifying recovery priorities in each of the focus areas.

### **Phase 3: Planning (Completed by May 15, 2021)**

Each district team will create a recovery plan using the Recovery Planning Toolkit developed by the AOE. State support teams will convene regional meetings to facilitate the sharing of regional strategies.

### **Phase 4: Implementation (Begins by June 1, 2021)**

Districts will begin to implement the strategies developed in their plans, including a strategy for summer programming. State support teams will provide implementation support and assist with the coordination of other state planning activities (e.g., continuous improvement planning).

June 1, 2021 is a target date for full implementation but it is important to acknowledge that schools will address the three student focus areas on a continual basis, and will likely gain momentum after April vacation as conditions improve and more in-person instruction is enacted. The June 1 milestone is meant to signal the beginning of the formal recovery work period, but districts should endeavor to begin that work as soon as possible.

The June 1 milestone is also meant to signal that the impact of the pandemic will be long lasting. Schools should not endeavor to get students totally “caught up” before they leave for the summer. Such an approach is unlikely to be successful, and it might do more harm than good. As we move towards the implementation phase, schools should maintain a balanced perspective on the three focus areas and prepare to conclude the school year on a celebratory note.

## Financial Resources

It is expected that districts will have sufficient funding through state and federal dollars to develop and implement their recovery plans. Districts should utilize federal grant funds to support state and local recovery priorities. The timing of this recovery planning initiative is

meant to be coincidental with several federal grant planning processes. Districts should seek to align their grant strategies with recovery priorities.

### **Staff Well-Being**

The priority and conceptualization of our recovery work will be student focused. It is important to acknowledge, however, that staff will need additional support as we embark on this next phase in our response. Districts should be alert to opportunities to provide staff with support services, and activities relative to implementing recovery plans for students. State support teams will be alert to staff needs in this area and will organize communities of practice to enable networks of educators to share and connect more dynamically across the state.