


MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, SPED Directors, Curriculum Coordinators
CC: VSA, VSBA, VPA, VTNEA, VCSEA
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education 
SUBJECT: Education in Vermont
DATE: April 26, 2017

Dear Educators,

A few weeks ago, as I watched students in Rutland kick off a day-long global issues conference they had planned, I had cause yet again to reflect on how proud and grateful I am to live in Vermont.

Sure, like anyone, we have things we can do better. And in our true New England crusty way, we tend to nod at what works and grind on where we think we fall short. But at the end of the day, we have much to celebrate and much on which we can build a strong and vibrant future for our children, communities and schools. As we work to improve, don't forget to build on what we do well.

You already know on average, our students are among the highest performing in the nation, and Education Week's Quality Counts 2016 and 2017 report placed Vermont third overall in the U.S.

However, there is so much more to our story.

- From a dance in Newport to divine choral music in Hardwick to visual arts at Green Mountain Union High School and countless other schools across the state, our schools mirror and amplify the strong culture and tradition of arts in Vermont.
- Our prekindergarten programs focus on play-based learning, because we know play IS the work of these youngest learners, and it is how these children develop the self-regulation and executive functioning capabilities they need to thrive in life beyond school.
- We put the strength of our farms into building the bodies and brains of our children. According to the 2015 USDA Farm to School Census, 83% of Vermont school districts have a farm-to-school program – the highest percentage in the country. We also have school gardens all over the state, along with outdoor classrooms.
- Vermont is the second healthiest state for women, children and infants after Massachusetts and New Hampshire (United Health Foundation, 2016). And all these healthy children can live active lives and take advantage of our unique landscape, including our environmental education programs in both our elementary and high schools.
- Even our biggest schools with the highest teacher to student ratios are small, compared to schools in other states. We still operate on a human scale and in systems where we can build a strong sense of shared community and common civic purpose.
- While our communities do have differing levels of wealth, our funding formula, though not perfect, has not incentivized the gross socioeconomic segregation that is pervasive in many contexts. Because we still work and learn together across levels of advantage in most communities, we are

still able to build the sense of shared purpose and investment that is the foundation of a healthy democracy. For the most part, we understand that investing in the care of our neighbor's child is taking care of our community and future prosperity.

- Schools are required to develop a highly personalized education system which increasingly provides choice from within the school, from independent study to applied community-based learning, from technology education to state-funded "early college," from internships to arts and creative education. (Education Quality Standards, Act 77 Flexible Pathways legislation).
- Strong Vermont communities are uniquely engaged in supporting local schools and local education decisions. We have extraordinary levels of local voice and community engagement in governance of our schools. Some people talk about democracy; we live it.
- Vermont's constitution puts the equity and safety and well-being of every child front and center, regardless of family wealth, race, national origin, religion or gender identity. Children are children: we stand behind their right to learn and be valued, however they define themselves.
- Vermont is one of only four states that refused to evaluate individual teachers based on test scores and thus largely avoided the widespread test-focused instruction that characterizes public and charter schools in other states. The deliberate rejection of high-stakes testing enabled Vermont schools to develop broad learning locally by drawing on Vermont's unique artistic, outdoor, agricultural, literary and intellectual assets.
- Vermont knows that our educators are our most valuable resource when it comes to creating powerful and engaging opportunities to learn. Getting better as a state means investing in and developing the professional capital of our educators. Educators from all over the state provided input on our integrated field review process, which will begin in earnest next year. This process reflects our belief that all students need to learn and perform at high levels, but how schools meet these goals for students will vary from community to community, based on local assets and preferences. Through visits across school sites, participating educators will observe and share and elevate promising strategies and practices, which build our shared professional capital. We have common goals and local agency to figure out how to best achieve them. This is how we will get better, together.
- We have inclusive policies statewide, and work hard to make sure every child feels safe and supported. Our disciplinary exclusion rates on average are a third of those in the rest of the nation. While we hope no child is ever excluded from class, our comparatively low rates speak to the strong efforts in many systems to support children in ways that reduce the likelihood of disciplinary incidents.
- Many districts are engaged in powerful initiatives to engage community members and the State colleges to enhance post-secondary and career success.
- Many districts have figured out how to repurpose staff and resources to support extended learning, including in the summer, to make sure our students don't lose ground during this time away and to make sure parents who work have a safe place to put their child

Our professional collaboration, our strong commitment to supportive and equitable education, our willingness to rethink practices to do better for our children; these and many others are reasons Vermont is a place I am proud to live. Thank you for all you do to make it this way.