



219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, VT 05641 (p) 802-479-1030 | (f) 802-479-1835

MEMORANDUM

TO: Principals, Superintendents, and Vermont Educators
COPY: VT-NEA, VSA, VPA, VSBA, VCSEA
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Our Responsibility for the Learning of our Students
DATE: February 28, 2017

With the new Administration in Washington and the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, we are in transition on several fronts, including how we talk about and manage our responsibility for ensuring all our students are well educated.

Our work in public education is paradoxical. On the one hand, we need good data on how we are doing, so that we can use that data to support continuous improvement in learning and to make sure we are achieving our equity goals, both locally and at the state level. If a test is too easy or too hard, it does not give us useful information to support that work. Vermont has always erred on the side of higher standards, to give us ambitious “stretch” goals for our children and ourselves.

Without good data, we would have no way to really evaluate whether our professional collaboration and the investments we make lead to the difference we want for our children. Without this data, we can't do our job. We must have high expectations, or we will not achieve what we hope for our children. Now, more than ever, our children need to be well educated in order to prosper and help build a strong state.

On the other hand, this transparency can leave us feeling vulnerable and discouraged when it is used to criticize our work or diminish our students. Children bring different kinds of privilege and disadvantage to school, and children who live in challenging circumstances are not evenly distributed across the state. We know that some communities are coping with unique levels of adversity, and this affects how their students score overall. We also know some communities have populations that are uniquely advantaged in the resources and education levels of their parents, and unsurprisingly, some of these communities are amongst our highest scoring. We have to move past a simplistic conversation of whether schools are good or bad, and towards a more meaningful conversation around:

1. What is our assessment data?
2. What does it tell us about how students are performing relative to our goals?
3. What are we doing to improve the learning of every child, no matter how that child scored?
4. Is it working? And if not, what could and should we do differently?

How we handle the data matters. If we tell students who are trying hard year after year that they don't measure up, we can discourage the very students who need the most support and encouragement. Rainbow Chen, a Winooski student and student member of the State Board of Education has said that we need to be encouraging students to work at getting better, not just telling them that they are not good enough every year. Some of you have observed that the transparency of our public systems is what makes them and our students vulnerable. You have said that even when you make great gains with students who live in extreme adversity, you are judged harshly against other contexts that may be more privileged or more selective or not transparent in ways that feel discouraging. I hear that. However, our response CAN'T be to diminish the very data we need to use as a ruler to measure our progress towards goals.

We all know that a child who can't read, write, problem-solve and reason quantitatively, has limited prospects in a 21st century economy. Our Smarter Balanced assessments (SB) certainly don't measure all we want our students to know and be able to do, but they do reliably measure a subset of essential skills that current best research suggests are associated with higher levels of learning and mastery. As we have more panels of data, we will be able to better evaluate the relationship between SB scores and critical post-secondary and career outcomes. However, what we do know is that students who have stronger literacy and numeracy skills tend to score higher not just on the SB, but on other measures of performance that we have used for years. If our students are not scoring well, we owe it to them to figure out how to change that result. And if, on average, the performance of our schools' children in each successive grade is not keeping pace with the performance of children across the state, we owe it to our communities to investigate why and identify changes we might make to strengthen outcomes.

For context, under the state Education Quality Standards and state statute, all schools must administer state assessments in order to provide the state and our communities with information about school performance. These common measures are designed to assess student learning relative to state adopted standards and to support schools in their continuous improvement efforts. [This letter](#) may also be helpful in reminding people of the various uses of testing in Vermont.

We acknowledge that when our students know and can do more, they will score better. Let's use these tests to get better, even as we keep in mind that not all that matters can be measured on a test. We also need our children to express themselves creatively, to work well with others on shared goals, and to think critically and deeply about complex and important problems. I am proud to live in a state that is leveraging flexible pathways, community-based learning, applied learning, and career and technical education to challenge our children to find joy and purpose in learning, and to be well-rounded.

Below are some practical steps I encourage us all to take.

Help your communities understand the difference between "assessments" and "accountability." The Smarter Balanced assessments are one reliable measure of student performance on a subset of skills that we have determined as a state that we want our students to master. We can measure progress in the incremental improvement of student performance on these assessments over time, in response to our professional collaboration, investments in instructional improvement and enhanced supports for learning. And, we know there are other capabilities

we want our students to develop that are not captured on these assessments, which is why locally, we expect you to use multiple measures. “Accountability” is about how the federal government and the state and local entities use these scores to motivate us to make a greater difference for our children. We have a challenging history with federal use of scores for federal accountability. In our Vermont context, federal accountability yielded a lot of perverse and nonsensical effects. However, federal issues should not and cannot prevent us from holding ourselves locally responsible for doing the best we can for our students, and in particular, for our vulnerable students, who most need us to ask hard questions about how we are organized and providing instruction in order to ensure their success. We know that how we teach, matters. We know that some systems are supporting students who bring greater challenges than previously. Let’s adjust our practice to address their needs.

With input from many of you, we have worked to develop a state response to the new federal ESSA accountability legislation that is responsive to and reflective of our shared goals for children. We need to meet the requirements of the law, and we have done so by drafting a response that captures our state commitment to continuous improvement and narrowing of equity gaps. In the end, while no plan will make every person in the state happy, any more than anyone will agree with every aspect of the plan, we have a coherent response that leverages our strong commitment to local responsibility and to improving outcomes for our most vulnerable youth.

My commitment to you is to try and be as transparent as possible about our continuous improvement work at the Agency, even as I expect you to be transparent and rigorous about your local efforts to improve in your communities. Just as you embark on a plan for continuous improvement, the AOE will develop a plan and share our own progress against goals. We do this because we know, as you know, that our first obligation is to our students, and we can’t make the difference we need to make for them if we are afraid to confront the challenges in our current work. We will work with you to help the public understand what assessment data mean and how they can most effectively be used, as well as to mitigate or challenge inappropriate uses of these data.

What I ask from you in return is that you stand with me as education professionals, and use all available data and all your instructional skill to inform and improve our collective efforts to develop our children’s capability and wellness across a broad set of domains, and strengthen our education system. Sometimes, this means letting go of longstanding practices that data suggest are ineffective. Sometimes this means taking some measured risks to try out new and promising strategies. What I know you share is my commitment to the idea that education is the best tool we have to ensure the prosperity, agency and independence of our students as they move into adult life.

Thank you all for staying focused on our students and on learning, even in the midst of so much change and reform. And, thank you for maintaining the imperative of high expectations for all students.