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## **OpEd: Let's Move Past the Education Politics of the Past**

**By Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education**

In the final weeks of the election cycle, supporters of the Vermont State College System and early education proponents made their pitch for additional funding in a challenging fiscal environment. Their ideas are constructive, their tone civil and they're making a good faith effort to add to the policy conversation. My predecessor also weighed in to rehash last year's debates.

As a former superintendent, I have spent years explaining Vermont's education finance system. I began my career in educational leadership with the advent of Act 60. Nearly 20 years later, in my last year as a superintendent, Act 46 became law. Throughout the years, I have navigated Montpelier's frequent tinkering with the system, and how we pay for it.

I believe we are now at a point where we need more comprehensive action.

We have an education spending problem (highest in the country in per pupil expenditures and special education expenditures), and according to almost every Vermonter I have met, property taxes are way too high. At the same time, we have no trouble inventing new education policy initiatives which, when taken together, have caused a certain amount of "initiative fatigue" across the system – our outcomes are good considering but are not proportional to how much we spend, and there is persistent inequality between our schools.

Vermont's underlying social and economic indicators are also worrisome. For example, according to the Department of Health, there were more deaths than births last year – the lowest birth rate since the Civil War. Many employers (including school districts) are facing skilled labor shortages. And, as our workforce shrinks, the costs of government are simultaneously increasing, and the state must pay off decades of underfunded pension obligations for retired public employees. These realities became front and center recently when the Moody's rating agency downgraded Vermont's bond rating due, in large part, to the pension liabilities and our demographic challenges.

Even absent these demographic and economic challenges, we would still be facing major transformational challenges in Vermont's education system. Education, like all other aspects of society, is going through significant changes because of technology. Technology allows us to create a more personalized and relevant learning system for students, and the content of what can be taught in our schools is expanding rapidly. It is truly an exciting time to be a student.

Technology also places our schools in a much more global, interconnected context. The need to maintain schools as the foundation of our democracy, supporting student development and the

common good, requires that we expand our horizons beyond the current limitations of local classrooms, school buildings and districts.

To finance education in this context will require a comprehensive systems approach. I suspect tinkering with the current system will not be sufficient, and I suspect denying we have a spending problem, although politically expedient, will only further drive costs up with no corresponding benefit to our students. Likewise, suggesting the work of Act 46, or the work we are about to start on restructuring our special education system under Act 173, will achieve the necessary outcomes in time to avoid the oncoming demographic crisis – is shortsighted and irresponsible.

It's time for clear vision and a smart plan of action.

Governor Scott has proposed that we transform a good, but increasingly expensive and unequal, education system into the very best in the country. He has asked us to put this work within the larger context of the state's growing social and economic needs.

In a knowledge-based economy, having a "cradle to career" education system is essential for making our education system both more relevant for students and more efficient for taxpayers. Education finance is a means to this end, not an end itself.

As I travel around the state, I am increasingly optimistic. We have the capacity, talent and ingenuity to transform our education system into the very best in the nation.

To do so, we will need to move past the education politics of the past and get to work.