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Opinion: Every Student Succeeds Act supports Agency's focus on continuous improvement

Secretary Rebecca Holcombe

Just over 50 years ago, in response to a national poverty rate of almost 20 percent, President Johnson introduced legislation known as the "War on Poverty." His goal was "not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it." A central piece was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which emphasized equal access to educational opportunity and accountability for meeting equity goals. The Act mandated funds to support those goals. As President Johnson stated when he signed the bill into law: "...with your courage and with your compassion and your desire, we will build a Great Society. It is a Society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled."

ESEA has been a powerful tool for advancing equitable education for vulnerable populations, including students who live in poverty, students who are learning English, and students who are members of groups that have experienced historical discrimination. By holding schools and states accountable for the learning of these students, while providing resources for their support, the federal government played a strong role in prodding states to care for these children. This investment, in the words of President Johnson, would provide a "passport from poverty."

The ESEA now has been through several reauthorizations and revisions, but equity has always been its core purpose, even when the methods caused debate. As President George W. Bush stated when the ESEA was reborn as the No Child Left Behind Act, the purpose was to ensure that "every single child, regardless of where they live, how they're raised, the income level of their family, every child receive a first-class education in America."

In December of 2015, 50 years after President Johnson signed the first ESEA into law, President Obama signed the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind. All 50 states have been working to come up with new state plans for how they will meet the requirements of the new law. With the help of thousands of stakeholders across the state, the Vermont Agency of Education created our Vermont draft plan, rooted in Vermont values and the Vermont Education Quality Standards. The draft is currently posted on the Agency website for review.

While this latest reauthorization has numerous important differences from its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) remains a civil rights law. It focuses attention and funds on our most vulnerable children – a goal unequivocally championed by Governor Scott in his inaugural address.

The development of this plan gave Vermonters across the state an opportunity to reflect on how well we serve our most vulnerable students. While Vermont consistently ranks well nationally

and internationally, we also have substantial equity gaps and room to grow, both at the state level and within and across our schools. Improving the learning of vulnerable populations, particularly through early intervention and supports, will improve learning for all our students, by reducing disruptions and reducing diversion of resources to remediation. Our future economic and civic well-being hinges upon every student leaving school with the skills, habits and understandings they need to fully participate in our communities.

We know that funding matters. Our ESSA plan will target federal investments to help all students thrive in school and add to the long-term economic vitality of the state. A pre-kindergarten child of a single parent in an entry-level job may need full-day pre-kindergarten, not just 10 hours of care, and perhaps federally-funded summer programming as well. A child who arrives in Vermont speaking limited English and whose education in a refugee camp was inconsistent may need additional supports to learn a new culture and language, so that they can thrive and become a productive adult.

Money helps, but money alone is not sufficient. We have to use dollars well, and in a way that is consistent with our state vision for a robust and well-rounded education. Therefore, Vermont's ESSA plan reflects our state's commitment to personalizing the education of all students, as expressed in the Vermont's Education Quality Standards. We expect our Vermont schools to understand the unique needs and goals of each student and craft an educational experience that prepares all students for their desired career or college outcome. We expect all our graduates to be well-enough educated to contribute economically and civically to an innovative Vermont.

The tools of ESSA help us identify schools struggling to meet these goals for all students, irrespective of background, and provide additional support and resources to those schools that serve the largest proportion of vulnerable children and/or children whose disadvantage has left them performing below their more advantaged peers.

Ultimately, the role of the state is to protect and support our most vulnerable children. Children do not choose their circumstances. ESSA provides us an opportunity to identify schools where students are not performing as well as we would like. The law also provides tools to identify which schools are succeeding in narrowing gaps, so that we can learn from their successes and continuously improve learning across the state. Our focus is on continuous improvement, because we know our schools, like the Agency, can always do better