

April 12, 2023

State Board of Education  
Vermont Agency of Education  
1 National Life Drive, Davis 5  
Montpelier, VT 05620-2501

RE: Public Comment for 4/13/23 Special Meeting

Dear Board Members,

This comment is regarding agenda item E, the proposed Education Quality Standards, and in relation the alteration of State Board of Education meeting procedures.

As you are aware, the 2000 Series Education Quality Standards (EQS) were created to detail what education should look like in Vermont. Up until now, these standards focused on detailing what a quality education looked like and how it can be provide to a bevy of students with differing abilities/interests. The most recent Statement of Purpose reads “The purposed of these rules is to ensure that all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education.”

We have certainly fallen short of that goal over in the past, and even more so in the recent past. Our proficiency rates are abysmal even while spending rates increase year after year to one of the highest per pupil cost of education in the nation. So, with that in mind, I am open to a change in the EQS that will increase proficiency rates and set our students up for success. I find the new EQS wanting on that front. It’s clear what the new priorities of this rule change are providing “equitable, anti-racists, culturally responsive, anti-discriminatory, and inclusive” education. This statement is repeated adnauseam throughout the revised document and even comes before “equal in quality” in the newly proposed Statement of Purpose. I can only assume this was done purposefully, since the Act 1 Working Group has spent years developing these changes at this point. The priority is clear, global activists over education.

In addition, the phrase “public schools” is mysteriously missing in the current version of the Statement of Purpose. Clearly the intention is that these new standards should apply to all schools, not just public schools.

2019 H.3 Findings list the following items as justification for the establishment of the Act 1 Working Group: 1) the 1999 Vermont Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, 2) the updated 2003 report, 2017 Act 54 report on Racial Disparities in State Systems, 4) 2017 hate crime reporting percentages, 5) news reports about harassment, 6) reports of hate symbols, 7) harassment of marginalized groups. None of these findings/reports contain substantial evidence of widespread discrimination in Vermont. These findings/reports don’t even provide the number of occurring incidents.

The reports that were presented to the US Commission on Civil Rights generally reference testimony, rather than data. Where data is referenced, such as the 'Kicked Out!' study prepared by Vermont Legal Aid, the data is focused solely on disparities and does not include any reference to incident reporting. I mention these items because we find ourselves perpetuating this same system of scanty evidence/data with a focus solely on equalized outcomes. In the Definitions of the EQS updates, academic record is explicit that it "shall not include school records, documents, notes, or descriptions of a student's disciplinary history with school staff or other students." Here is the root of the problem, we are seeking equal outcomes for students, rather than seeking quality education.

Policies across the nation are being focused on providing equitable outcomes, and the result is failure on system wide level. Barrington Public Schools in Rhode Island and Culver City Unified School District in California are prominent examples of the elimination of all school/district-wide honors classes in the name of equity. How long until Vermont school districts are in the same position?

Its clear that the State Board of Education is looking to push these EQS updates through quickly, as is evident by the increasing frequency of meetings in recent months to finalize the proposal and the addition of this Special Meeting, with minimal notice, to discuss and vote on these updates which were only completed on 4/11/23.

In sum, I plead for this Board to stop and consider the implications of this update to the EQS. We are abandoning reason and data for activism. Worse yet is that we will not be affected by this update, it will be our children's education and in turn their future. Put aside these mantras of social justice and focus on your mandate to provide quality education in Vermont, a thing which has been declining for some time now.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nicholas Smith', written over a light blue rectangular background.

Nicholas Smith  
Milton Resident