

Draft of 7-19-16

ITEM L1

July 29, 2016

To: Superintendents, Principals, Teachers and School Boards

From: State Board of Education

Re: Federal Every Student Succeeds Act

In December 2015, the federal government reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, formerly known as the No Child Left Behind Act. The new version is named the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and is to be phased in through 2017-18.

From a policy perspective, it is a continuation of many of the failed features of NCLB. It is troubling and problematic in continuing an over-reliance on standardized testing and prescribing a narrow definition of learning. As important and essential as basic learning, recent national and international events remind us that a sound education must also include the quality of our civic life, our caring for each other, robust learning opportunities and the advancement of the health of our society.

To put this in perspective, the state board's strategic goals are to:

- *Ensure that Vermont's public education system operates within the framework of high expectations for every learner and ensure that there is equity in opportunity for all.*
- *Ensure that the public education system is stable, efficient, and responsive to ever-changing population needs, economic changes and ever changing 21st century issues.*

While the original purpose of the federal law was to raise the performance of our neediest, the federal prescription has shifted and only imperfectly matches our goals. The chronic underfunding of the federal law denies equal opportunities and the narrow accountability system denies a comprehensive vision of the needs of the twenty-first century. Secretary King urges us to provide a well-rounded education while the House appropriation committee cut \$1.3 Billion from the budget. (The biggest proposed reduction, at this time, is in special education).

Yet, these limited and diminishing dollars are critical for many of our schools. They provide up to 11% of the budget in our highest poverty districts. We are mindful that Vermont taxpayers pay our share of federal taxes and ESSA returns some of these tax dollars to support greater equity. As ill-funded as the federal program, we have no available resources to fill the



gap.

At the same time, the federal program must align with our Education Quality Standards and the Integrated Field Reviews. We must design our work so that federal policy is minimally disruptive to our strong efforts to improve equity and improve quality. We note the federal regulations may require a “single school indicator number. Some states are proposing broader and more sophisticated mechanisms. We must hold on to the more appropriate Education Quality Standards which are most validly evaluated through a combination of empirical measures and qualitative field reviews.

The federal data criteria are based on sound measurement concepts (rigorous, reliable, possible to disaggregate at the student level) but these rigid requirements do not capture the full breadth and depth of what is necessary for high quality, equitable education.

Furthermore, ESSA is built on a framework that requires identification of the lowest scoring five percent of schools which will be identified for ‘Comprehensive Support.’ No matter how diplomatically phrased, this is a continuation of the shaming and punishment approach which proved so unsuccessful in NCLB. However, this labeling brings with it resources for improving services for students. While, the state board is aware that some of the most powerful learning in the state is happening in schools that serve a large proportion of students living in poverty, students who are learning English, or students with disabilities, we know that the ESSA criteria will result in wrongly identifying schools with the greatest burdens and the least capacity. Unfortunately, these scores measure the inequities in our society more than the quality of our schools.

While the federal rules are not yet finalized, it is our hope that we will be able to drive these funds to the neediest areas and schools in the most positive, efficient and effective way. In a time when fragmentation, tragedies and separation afflicts our nation and the world, we embrace all of Vermont’s children as our children knowing that the success and prosperity of the state, our neighbors, and ourselves depends on the quality and equality educational experiences we provide our children.

