

VERMONT'S STRATEGIC VISION FOR EDUCATION
Draft for Discussion

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Introduction

"If we could learn how to utilize all the intelligence and patent good will children are born with, instead of ignoring much of it – why, there might be enough to go around! There might be enough to solve our alarming human problems, to put an end to poverty, to stop waging wars."

So wrote Vermont educator, author, and social activist Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the first woman to serve (a hundred years ago!) on the Vermont State Board of Education. Then, as now, the State Board of Education is devoted to Vermont's children and youngsters and to the schools that educate them.

Like folks in most states, we here in Vermont worry about how we'll thrive in this fast-changing world, and especially we worry about the world that our children and grandchildren will inherit. We know that democracy and opportunity are vital to their futures as Vermonters and as Americans. And we know that education is the most powerful force we have to promote individual opportunity and community self-governance.

It is no accident that all democracies have put a high estimate upon education, that schooling has been their first care and enduring charge. Only through education can equality of opportunity be anything more than a phrase....Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.

*-- American educator and philosopher, John Dewey
 (1859-1952: born and educated in Vermont)*

Today in Vermont we see many of the cultural and economic challenges that beset most states and even our neighbors in Canada: working folks struggling to make ends meet, more children born with drug-induced disabilities, more single-parent households, greater disparities between rich and poor. All of these forces tend to cleave us into haves and have-nots, straining our faith that we are one community, that we are, altogether, *Vermonters*.

Yet despite these diffusive forces, Vermont is a healthy and vibrant place to live. By any measure, the quality of life for most Vermonters is better than in most other states. For example, Vermonters' access to health care is among the best in the nation. But job opportunities are fewer than in many states, Vermonters' incomes are middling, and taxes burdens are high. Nonetheless, Vermonters are healthier, safer, and better educated than most other Americans. Not coincidentally, democracy, from Town Halls to the State House, is alive and well in Vermont.

Education is strong in Vermont. By most measures, Vermont's pK-12 education system is among the best in the nation: high scores on standardized tests, strong measures of child health and well-being, low drop-out rates, and strong graduation rates.

Yet weaknesses and challenges persist. Educational outcomes in Vermont vary widely depending upon socio-economic background. Not enough high-school graduates go on to post-secondary education or training. And the sheer cost of pK-12 education in Vermont is high, contributing to a high tax-burden, which, in turn, discourages growth and opportunity in our state.

*-- prepared by SBE strategic plan working group
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Overview

This document, VERMONT'S STRATEGIC VISION FOR EDUCATION, aims to address the challenges and weaknesses in our state's educational outcomes, all the while building on and extending the many assets and strengths of pK-12 education in Vermont. Looking ahead over the next five-to-ten years, we see the challenges and opportunities facing education in Vermont in three dimensions:

- equity,
- excellence, and
- efficiency

By *equity*, we mean equity of opportunity – opportunity for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background or disability. Our goal is that each individual student attains sufficient knowledge and skills to pursue the post-secondary education/training and career path of her/his choice and to become active and contributing members of our communities

By *excellence*, we mean educational excellence – outstanding outcomes. Our goal is that young Vermonters are among the best-educated in America, well-prepared as young citizens, and ready to move on to post-secondary vocational/career preparation and education.

By *efficiency*, we mean an educational system that creates high value at an affordable cost -- the best education system that we can afford. Our goal is a pK-12 educational system that Vermont tax-payers can value and post-secondary training and education that Vermont students and their families can afford.

Clearly, these three dimensions complement one another. It's imperative to move forward on all three fronts simultaneously. For example, educational excellence for some students is a shallow achievement if youngsters with disadvantages or disabilities aren't also succeeding. Conversely, achieving equity of opportunity is a failure if weak schools remain unimproved or if the overall quality and performance of our schools are allowed to deteriorate.

Moving forward simultaneously on all three dimensions will be hard. In many ways, each dimension competes with the others. For example, driving efficiencies in education so as to cut costs risks compromising excellence, or equity, or both. Conversely, driving forward on excellence or equity without regard to efficiency risks making that progress unsustainable.

So this will be hard. If it were easy, we'd have done it already. If it were easy, we wouldn't need a strategic plan to guide us.

A good strategic plan answers three questions:

- What matters most? That is, what are our major objectives?
- How will we get there? For each major objective, what are the initiatives, methods, and practices that we'll implement to actually achieve the objective?
- How will we know we've succeeded? What will be the observable results and what measures will tell us how close we are to success on each objective?

In the three sections that follow, we address these questions for each of the three dimensions of education – equity, excellence, and efficiency – that are at the core of our strategic vision for education in Vermont.