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**DRAFT – DISCUSSION PAPER**  
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*Vermont law (16 VSA 164 (21)) requires the State Board of Education to report annually to the Governor and General Assembly on the progress made on the development of the state's education policy. This report shares policy concerns and recommends actions for Vermont's education system.*

**The State Board of Education's Strategic Plan embraces two major Goals:**

- *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 and 21st century issues.*

With equity and equality as our primary goals, we must address the opportunity and achievement gaps. Solving this problem also requires going beyond the schoolhouse walls. With two-thirds of test score variation due to outside of school factors, we must address the root causes of poverty and inequality. This inevitably raises the need for high quality jobs, at a livable wage. With the number of single and working families, wage equity is also required. This also necessitates continuing our work in universal health care and controlling medical costs (which also has a direct effect on school budgets). We must also ensure that Vermont parents have affordable high quality daycare and equitable access to high quality pre-school.

While our greatest returns are found in prevention activities, we realize that our social support network must effectively address addiction issues, provide mental health support, and assure food security for all.

Schools are essential partners in this work. They must work effectively and efficiently with other government agencies. Full service schools, the maturation of our early education initiative, and high quality summer and after school activities must be encouraged. We have state accountability laws in place (which will be affected by the new federal law) but our capacity to carry out current legal obligations for bi-annual evaluations of each school and the articulation of professional improvement is not possible within our resources.

**Enhancing and Preserving our Progress: Providing sufficient agency and state board staff, and curtailing the incremental expansion of unfunded mandates–**

For the last several years, the state board has asked that no new programs be added. We are aware of the state's fiscal limitations and would rather fund a few programs well rather than a larger number so poorly that they cannot be successful. The state agency has been reduced from 213 positions to 170. The agency has suffered a forty percent loss in their budget since 2008 which raises entropic concerns.

Particular programs not having sufficient capacity

- School governance – Act 46 – consists of one position. The government relies on vested interest organizations to provide support, and as a matter of principle, this is unwise governance.
- Individual learning plans –No capacity
- Education quality standards (EQS)-
- Unfolding federal accountability changes – A federal continuing resolution is expected during the lame duck session.[Cannot ascertain]

**State Board Support Capacity** – With the legislature's separation of the Secretary and Agency from the state board and the simultaneous increase in legislated responsibilities, the state board requires staff support. However, with actions as complex as those required under Act 46, the board needs continuing legal assistance and staff support if it is to carry-out its responsibilities.

**Goal One - Equity and Opportunity for All** – A number of inter-related policy areas are impacted:

- Early education – The universal pre-k law is a great step forward. While among the most worthwhile of educational initiatives, the limits on hours per week and weeks of service represent an insurmountable obstacle for many working families. The capped public-private funding system inequitably subsidizes the affluent. A system that favors parents that have the means to upgrade the quality of services (which is financially impossible for less affluent parents) results in lesser benefits for our most needy. This situation, over the long term, increases social inequalities and harms the state's economic health. Furthermore, it is unstable. In order to establish a universal level of services and level the inequities between providers, the legislature should empower school districts to operate these programs. This is a venue where local control is the most viable approach,.
- Equality of Opportunity in Independent Schools– Equality of opportunity and accountability of public funds are being addressed in the rules making process. The common benefits clause states that no citizen may receive a benefit not available to other citizens. The provision of a subsidy to affluent parents to send their children to expensive schools in foreign countries and in other states but which is not equally available to less affluent parents offends democratic and equalitarian principles. (It is recognized that some exceptions

- for special needs students and interstate compact districts, are needed).
- Excess school capacity, and opening new schools – Vermont has experienced a loss of 16% of its school population from 2001 to 2014. Consequently, the state suffers from excess capacity and expensive duplication.
    - Current law says the state board must approve new school proposals if they meet the criteria regardless of capacity and/or socio-economic balance.
    - Paradoxically, during this time, the number of independent schools grew from 68 to 93 but the number of publicly funded students going to these same schools declined by 29% from 4361 to 3392. Most of the new schools are small private schools. Act 46 was passed to deal with the excess capacity concern but closing schools and cutting staff is slow and difficult.
    - Generally speaking, the state has no authority to right-size the system either in public or independent capacities absent a town vote.
  
  - Tuitioning – Independent schools and academies have been, and continue to be, an integrated element in Vermont. Some advocates argue for the broader use of tuitioning as a solution to the student decline. However, such a move would be counter-productive. Tuitioning causes significant cost duplication and there is a solid body of research evidence that shows it is segregative and socially harmful.
  
  - Act 46 - The Consolidation of Administrative Structures – Act 46 has had a successful first year.
    - Timelines - Yet, the complexity of the local conversations argues for giving the law more time to work. Consequently, relaxing the timelines by one year is needed.
    - Preferred vs. Alternate Plans - The law also gives ambiguous advice to local planning groups in terms of preferred vs. alternate plans. The interpretation of preferred plans needs to be relaxed.
    - Tuitioning in operating and non-operating schools –The state board has confirmed the long-standing Vermont practice of tuitioning individual students from their designated schools only under exceptional circumstances. To open this interpretation would threaten the financial viability and economies of scale of union schools and would result in redundancy, diffusion of resources, and inefficiency.
    - Staffing – Training and assistance to local districts needs to be provided by the agency. Governance must come from government and not from vested interest groups.

**Enhancing Fiscal Efficiency** – *The SBE’s second priority is to ensure that the public education system is stable, efficient, and responsive to ever-changing population needs, economic and 21st century issues.*

Vermont’s education spending is one of the highest in the nation regardless of how the number is calculated. However, this arithmetic fact is due to the aforementioned 16% decline in the state’s student population. Meanwhile, capital costs still have to be paid and staffing ratios have not dropped at the same rate as enrollments. This calls for fiscal discipline. The SBE’s key fiscal principles are:

- Cost-shifts must be avoided,
- unfunded mandates must not be adopted,
- any change in the funding system should advance tax progressivity and rely on broad-based taxes, and
- Special education funding needs revisiting with a focus on simplicity and the elimination of excessive bureaucracy.

**Student Privacy Protections** – There are a number of assertions that “big data” will resolve a multitude of education concerns. These promises must be balanced against the all-too-frequent breaches and misuse of data. Unfortunately, if the information is collected recent history shows it can be hacked. The state board recommends that the legislature enact strong protections on data collection immediately. Model legislation is available through NASBE. <http://www.nasbe.org/project/education-data-privacy/other-resources-2/>