

February 16, 2016

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.*

Preamble – With equity and equality as a primary goal, we are compelled to address the opportunity and achievement gaps. With two-thirds of test score variation due to outside of school factors, solving this problem requires going beyond the schoolhouse walls. 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 mothers, wage equity is also required. This also necessitates that we continue our work in universal health care and that costs be controlled (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 pay-off is 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 an essential partner in this work. They must work effectively and efficiently with other agencies, particularly the Agency of Human Services. Full service schools, the maturation of our early education initiative, and high quality summer and after school activities must be encouraged. We have accountability laws in place (which will be affected by the new federal law) but our capacity to carry out current legal obligation for annual evaluations of each school and the articulation of professional improvement is not possible within our resources.

Policy Priorities – With these principles and the state's fiscal realities in mind, the State Board's priorities are:

Enhancing and Preserving our Progress: No New Educational Initiatives - Vital on-going policy initiatives must be protected and brought to fruition:

- School governance
- Dual enrollments
- Early education
- Independent schools rules review
- Individual learning plans
- Education quality standards (EQS)
- Implementing graduation requirements in EQS
- Unfolding federal accountability changes.

School districts and the state are under severe financial constraints and we must guard our resources and our energy. Rather than new mandates, the General Assembly is asked to streamline existing programs, increase efficiency, and address demographic shifts that are transforming the state as well as education. Although many laudable ideas have been put forth, new task forces, reports, and initiatives must be avoided.

Act 46 issues – In the early implementation of Act 46, several issues have arisen. We expect the difficult decisions will come in Phase III implementation, around 2018 and 2019

- Staffing – The state board must be adequately staffed if the initiative is to succeed.
- Choice in operating and non-operating schools – The issue takes form in whether a school can both operate and tuition students as a matter of course. In general, these two approaches are mutually exclusive. The state board has confirmed the existing practice of operating schools only tuitioning under individual exceptional circumstances. Doing both would result in redundancy, diffusion of resources, inefficiency, excessive duplicative costs and threaten the financial viability of schools.
- Choice – Vermont’s Constitution declares the purpose of public schools to be the betterment of society as a whole, rather than an individual’s market decision. Furthermore, choice has a decentralizing effect at the same time that Act 46 calls for greater regional centralization. Choice also causes inequities and cost duplications. Existing choice laws and the inclusion of choice provisions within local Act 46 articles of agreement adequately addresses special needs and local circumstances.
- Equality of Opportunity in Independent Schools – The State Board has asked the Agency to begin the development work of updating independent school rules. The guiding principle is that a private school receiving state monies should be subject to the same rules as public schools, particularly as relates to

school quality. Independent schools must also employ the same non-discriminatory criteria as public schools in student acceptance. It is recognized that schools for special needs are an exception to this principle.

Enhance Fiscal Efficiency – School finance, formulas and spending are perennial concerns and will always be on the agenda: The SBE’s 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.

Comprehensively review staffing in the Agency of Education, and within our schools

– In order to properly implement new legislation and the Education Quality Standards there must be adequate state staffing. Conversely, our school staffing complements, arguably the most favorable in the nation, require review.

Technical education – Periodically, the manner of providing technical education requires review. Changing work-force needs for traditional students as well as adults requires continued coordination with employers. Likewise, technical centers must be included in Act 46 conversations of sending districts.

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/>