

State of Vermont
Department of Education

ESEA Flexibility Proposal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All great things are done for their own sake. – Robert Frost

Introduction

In Vermont, we are using the ESEA flexibility opportunity as a catalyst to bring meaningful education goals and objectives together, converging our efforts toward a focal point of conceptual change in education delivery in the 21st century – resulting in a true learner centered system of education. If you find yourself wondering why this is even necessary, please consider the following observations. School boards, superintendents, and state departments struggle to do more with less. Teachers and principals work to make sense of being placed under a microscope that seeks not only the genesis of the optimal learning environment, but frames the problem as if they have had the solutions all along and just aren't using them. Young people and their families are bombarded with exponentially increasing access to information and learning opportunities. Yet throughout all this, common themes consistently emerge that both better define the problem and illuminate the way forward.

So what do we understand about the problem? The problem is that our current public education system was never designed with the objective of getting all students to a high school diploma, much less a college degree. The current system was designed to effectively sort all of America's children into categories that ensured the varied workforce needs of the early and mid twentieth century were met. When those workforce needs changed due to increased mobility, technological advances, and other global forces, our educational system did not respond in kind. The results we are getting right now are the results the system was intended to produce. The advent of IDEA and later NCLB, highlighted some of the areas where we need to focus our attention, but both are overly prescriptive and neither offer solutions to the problem defined above.

In Vermont, we have comparatively small communities and a small number of students. In relative time, the problem of diminishing local opportunities for our children post K-12 is fairly recent. This is not a result of the quality of education, but raising the quality of our education is a key element of the solution to a establishing a higher standard for workforce development, eliminating poverty, and reducing rates of incarceration. Vermont is recognized for providing high quality education for all students regardless of economic circumstance or learning differences. We were one of the first to embrace the importance of early learning and high quality early child care. We have long been known as the gold standard for providing access to individualized special education services. When No Child Left Behind was introduced, we pursued the requirements with vigor – set high standards, developed statewide assessments, established high cut scores for student proficiency and set ambitious progress targets.

Having high standards and the ability to evaluate student learning progress is as important today as it was then. Unfortunately, we find after several years that application of these efforts is highly variable in our state. And much of our work serves only to point out problems, rather than provide opportunities for resolving them. The shift we seek in our plan to reframe the concept of accountability in our state is to put problem recognition in its proper place, and provide more emphasis and support to conceptualizing and creating the learning environment we seek; those environments that will ensure all Vermont young people have the best opportunity to learn and be prepared for the 21st century and beyond.

Vision

We envision a system that:

- Drives equitable access to effective instruction using multiple methods and flexible pathways,
- Results in demonstrated achievement of high learning standards relevant to the 21st century,
- Establishes accountability for continuous growth for the learner, and continuous improvement at all levels of the system.

Philosophy

Several elements frame our overall approach to this work.

1. Learners have very diverse strengths and abilities and the learning environment should be responsive to the needs of the learner. And while family life and economic circumstances have a significant impact on the learning life of a child, we have evidence to support educational experience can have a significant effect on the learning progress of all children, regardless of personal circumstance.
2. We know that highly personalized learning environments where high expectations are held for all students, play a significant role in ameliorating the effects of personal circumstance outside the learning environment, and in attending to the diverse needs of all learners.
3. Schools with significant populations of high need students should be supported at the local and state level in addressing the needs of those students, and this should never involve shaming tactics to generate improvement.
4. All learners should have access to high quality educational opportunities that prepare them to pursue post secondary aspirations of choice.
5. Assessments should be relevant first and foremost to the work of the teacher, the learner, and their family. The results should be used to directly inform adjustments to the learning environment for the benefit of the learner.
6. Learner engagement is paramount. For learners in middle and high school in particular, this means high stakes assessments must have relevance and value to the learner beyond the lesson itself. Summative assessments in high school should have a direct correlation to student advancement to graduation, college or technical school entrance, and/or work-force preparedness.

Goals, Principles and Desired Outcomes

The changes we require will be not only ‘in our organizations’ but ‘in ourselves as well.’ – Peter Senge

Our old state level system measures outputs and defines inputs, and after several years we see only marginal difference overall in the outcomes we seek for our children. The new system will do the opposite. We will work to identify, measure, and support inputs demonstrated to make the most difference for learners. Based on what we learn, we will work to scale those efforts in locally nuanced ways that work effectively in schools which are small by national standards, have low teacher student ratios, have high levels of community engagement and are often rural. Key attributes of these environments include:

- Developing strong leaders who foster high expectations for all learners;
- Supporting a professional teaching culture that involves – collaboration, use of student progress data to inform instruction, and professional learning opportunities that prepare teachers to address varying student learning needs;
- Creating a learning culture that is personalized, safe, supportive, and inviting to students and families of all demographics; and
- Supporting a local governance structure that encourages a focus on student learning and continuous improvement.

Vermont remains committed to accountability. We will continue to focus our efforts on creating a system of continuous improvement for all schools, where the needs are evident and the focus of our activities is intentional and measurable. Key principles include a system that:

1. Recognizes the learning continuum PK-16 by starting early, attending to transition points, and raising the standard from “high school completion” to “college and career readiness”.
2. Prioritizes closing achievement gaps for learners who face the greatest challenges.
3. Prioritizes resources – including partnerships with agencies, associations, and institutions of higher education – toward helping teachers and principals in schools with student populations of greatest need.
4. Increases student access to opportunities known to improve engagement and outcomes.
5. Benchmarks student and school progress against their own starting point, yet maintains rigorous expectations for those schools or groups with lower starting points.
6. Builds capacity at the local level to recognize and respond to achievement challenges.
7. Celebrates progress, highlighting and supporting replication of successful practices.

The outcomes we seek are the following:

- **All children enter kindergarten ready to learn.**
- **All children have strong foundations in reading and math when they enter 4th grade.**
- **All students have a portable, personalized learning plan and portfolio.**
- **All students graduate with the credentials they need to pursue college/career directions**

of choice.

Unfortunately, many Vermont children still do not receive the supports and interventions necessary to ensure they have the opportunity to attain these outcomes. For this reason, Vermont seeks flexibility to USED Elementary and Secondary Education Act requirements in order to implement systemic changes we believe will have greater impact on student learning outcomes than those imposed over the last 10 years through No Child Left Behind.

In redefining our system, the VT DOE will accelerate our emphasis on education quality over school quality. Primary areas of focus include working to support school leaders in providing multiple pathways to student readiness for college and the work force; using aggregate information on student progress and needs to inform state policy and funding agendas; providing a tiered system of support for schools across the state where resources and attention are intensified based on the needs of the student population and the capacity building needs of the school; engaging critical partners to help in this work.

Much of this work is reflected in the SBE 2010 strategic plan; in the concurrent work of the VSBPE; in education associations such as the VSA, VPA, VSBA; and in ongoing collaborations such as NESSC, Early Learning Challenge Grant, and the PK-16 Council. Only a few specific areas require a waiver to proceed:

Reducing the number of years the NECAP test is administered – redirecting related financial and staff resources freed up to scale consistent progress monitoring systems for reading and mathematics in grades K, 1, 2, 3; and the use of assessments that have a direct correlation to graduation, college and technical school entrance, and workforce preparedness in high school.

Eliminating the use of universal AYP targets that increase every three years – and replacing them with annual measurable objectives that start with the school's current (2011/2012) NECAP results for all students and sub-groups and provides annual student growth targets of equal annual increments to reduce the number of non-proficient students in each category by 50% over the next six years.

Replacing the annual publication of schools that did not make AYP – with a publication of schools and their individual growth objectives and progress made annually towards those objectives.

Eliminating progressive sanctions on schools that don't meet unrealistically high targets – and continuing to implement a tiered approach to supporting schools where data and diagnostic tools and supports for effective interventions are provided universally, and more focused supports, interventions, and resources are provided to schools progressively based on demonstrated student need and school capacity to respond to that need.

Adding a fifth model for new School Improvement Grant participants – that does not

require dismissal of principals and teachers, is aligned with characteristics of highly effective schools and emphasizes rapid improvement strategies for generating student growth.

Eliminating federal Highly Qualified Teacher reporting and requirements – and supporting and guiding the creation of a coherent system of evaluation and development for principals and teachers that is informed by student growth; and provides teachers and principals with ongoing feedback, mentoring, and professional learning opportunities designed to address the needs of the students in their purview.

In addition to the changes above that relate specifically to the accountability system, the following reference further changes to our system that will better situate us to focus our work toward the vision articulated earlier. In all, we find a common theme that requires we celebrate a spirit of inquiry and experimentation not only for the learner, but for the educators and leaders as well.

Create a state-wide continuous improvement cycle

- Emphasizing high quality early learning opportunities and kindergarten readiness assessments for all children to inform learning needs in primary grades.
- Analyzing data longitudinally as well as by school, SU/D and state; aggregating student data on progress, growth, levels of attainment, and access to flexible yet rigorous learning opportunities; analyzing and incorporating trends in communications and strategy.
- Consolidating state requirements to report on disparate elements of education service delivery (e.g. school quality, service to diverse learners through Educational Support System Surveys and Special Education Service Plans) into one coherent report produced at the SU/D level that incorporates critical elements of school action plans related to continuous improvement.
- Reviewing action plans (above) at the state level through a DOE continuous improvement team led by the Deputy Commissioner. Synthesizing trends, needs, and successes into one “Annual Education Progress Report” from the Commissioner’s Office. This report would highlight student demographics, learning outcomes, and information from the above reports in ways that are meaningful for the education community, state and local policy makers, and business, community and families across the state.
- Focusing available resources on statewide needs for educator and leadership development in meeting the diverse needs of students.
- Re-writing school quality standards to be reflective of education quality elements and aligned with 21st century learning priorities.
- Emphasizing and prioritizing efforts that move towards learning communities that are not constrained by time or place.
- Promoting and resourcing high school opportunities that increase student engagement and provide opportunities for greater personal agency in defining flexible learning pathways toward post-secondary pursuits and careers of interest.
- Creating funding flexibility to maximize better integration of best practice and the move

- away from implementing isolated programs that show minimal benefit to students.
- Removing unnecessary burdens in state and local reporting and regulatory requirements that do not contribute to the health and success of the system as a whole.

We are committed to preparing all learners with the skills and abilities to pursue college and workforce directions of choice when exiting the K-12 system. In order to do this effectively, we need to reframe the paradigm of education accountability towards a system of quality where time and place are variable, and all student learning matters; where learner growth is evaluated for the benefit of the student and his or her family over time, and is used by educators and leaders to inform future practice and policy.

For years, Vermont has been edging toward transformation in education. Admittedly, it can be an iterative process. But the moment for supporting conceptual change at the deepest level is now. Conceptual change cannot be approached piecemeal. We must envision what we want as a whole, and then continuously adjust the levers that drive us in that direction.

One final note as we think about how we use this opportunity to leverage our greater goals. A cautionary tale around a word that is already in danger of being overused and undervalued – the word is ‘learn.’ Peter Senge describes learning this way:

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. – Peter Senge

This is the type of learning we want for all of our young people, all of our educators, and our leaders. All we need do is create the environment to support and compel it at every turn.