

PETER SHUMLIN
Governor



State of Vermont
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

September 15, 2011

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202-0008

Dear Secretary Duncan,

Thank you for your leadership to ensure that all students in America have access to high quality education. As you are aware, No Child Left Behind has become an obstacle to those of us committed to the goals of individual achievement, high standards, and quality instruction. States can't successfully reconcile an ineffective, outdated law with modern, bold initiatives aimed at raising student achievement. Thank you for providing Vermont with an opportunity to take a leading role in what is the most important function of our democracy - educating our children.

Vermont has long been recognized for providing high quality education for all students regardless of economic circumstance or learning difference. 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 ambitious targets for progress. Having high standards and the ability to evaluate progress is as important today as it was then.

The results of our statewide assessments confirm that the populations who struggle most in our system, as in other states, are those students who are economically disadvantaged, those who learn differently, and minority and non-English speaking immigrant children. Imposing the actions and sanctions required by No Child Left Behind have produced little improvement for students of those populations in Vermont. We have, however, found advancements by: encouraging strong leaders who foster high expectations for all learners; establishing a professional teaching culture that involves collaboration, use of student progress data to inform instruction, and pursuit of professional learning to address student needs; encouraging a school culture that is safe and supportive of students and inviting to families of all demographics; and supporting our local governance structure that encourages a focus on student learning and continuous improvement.

Last year, we identified fourteen schools of distinction that closed achievement gaps and raised levels of learning for all students. All fourteen schools have low-income populations in excess of 25 percent. All schools used the methods described above to make considerable progress with students who face significant learning differences and personal challenges. This progress translated to reading and mathematics proficiency levels for more than 80 percent of all students and more than 70 percent for students eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. Yet with the new, artificially high targets for 2011, some of these schools were forced for the first time to join the list of “failing schools” in Vermont.

Increasing already high targets creates a disproportionate number of “failing schools” that by other meaningful measures show progress and success. Derogatory labels and punitive sanctions are demoralizing to students, teachers, principals, and families. We therefore request relief from the one-size-fits-all requirements and sanctions imposed by the sections on Accountability, Assessment, and Improvement in No Child Left Behind. Specifically, we request to return to 2009 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets and waive the requirements for annualized achievement testing, related school determinations, and resulting progressive corrective actions (Attachment A).

Vermont remains committed to accountability and we will focus our efforts on implementing a new system of school assistance indicators, determinations, interventions and supports that will more effectively support educators and increase student achievement. We are committed to transforming education in ways that will increase the level of college and workforce preparedness amongst our young people dramatically over the next 8 years (Attachment B). We have and will continue to invest heavily in a system in which learning and education planning and delivery are personalized throughout the PK-16 system, and have set the following goals:

- All children enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- All children have strong foundations in reading and math by 4th grade.
- All students have a portable, personalized learning plan and portfolio.
- All students graduate ready to pursue higher education.

Unfortunately, all Vermont children are not yet meeting these goals. For this reason, we emphasize the need for flexibility. We propose to move from a system that hampers educators to a transformative framework that assists them in meeting the needs of our learners (Attachment C). Vermont will do this in the following ways:

Years 1 & 2:

1. Return AYP targets to 2009 levels and hold them over the three years while we implement a new School Assistance and Improvement system.
2. Focus simultaneously on identifying and addressing early learning challenges and engaging middle and high school students in ways that are relevant to their future.
3. Use standardized achievement tests in the way they were intended - to identify key trends and areas in need of attention at scale. These tests will be used during key transition times, in grades

3 and 7. Current statewide high school assessments in reading and math lack meaning and relevance to students. Therefore, in high school, we will use assessments that are relevant to students pursuing college and the workforce - based on self selected post secondary direction - including ACT, SAT, Work Keys, Industry Certifications.

4. Develop a new school assistance model that uses a range of School Assistance Indicators (SAI) to measure increased access to opportunity for students. These indicators will reflect the characteristics of effective schools and include: effective instruction and continuous opportunities for professional collaboration; safe and healthy school climates; family and community engagement; skill development in communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity; access to technology; and access to supports for children and families in need.

5. Use SAI to identify school support needs differentially, using determinations for schools ranging from “distinguished” to schools in need of “priority assistance.” We will use state and regional education partners to bring coaching, training, technical assistance and resources to priority need schools so they can build capacity while being held accountable for all students achieving high standards.

6. Additional indicators in middle and high school will be used to measure student access to academic rigor and opportunity, including strategies which are demonstrated as successful in increasing student engagement, retention and post secondary aspirations such as dual enrollment, virtual learning, and early college; STEM; Algebra I & II, Geometry, Biology, Physics; technical and professional writing; AP/Honors courses; middle school exposure to careers tracks; and high school internships, cooperatives and service learning.

7. Aggregate what we learn about the needs and gaps for individual students to identify populations that continue to be underserved and identify training and infrastructure needs to better support learning. Use this information to frame education policy priorities and actions.

8. Continue to develop and implement local evaluation methods that identify gaps in learning for each child, specifically in the areas of reading, mathematics, science, writing, social skills, and problem solving.

Years 3 and 4:

1. We will redefine graduation expectations and requirements to better align post secondary aspiration rates with graduation rates. We will provide multiple pathways to graduation, including performance based options; increase post secondary aspiration rates over time; and increase post secondary pursuits and completion over time.

2. Provide the technology and training to implement personalized learning plans which follow the child throughout their learning experience and culminate in portable learning portfolios.


3. Replace highly qualified teacher (HQT) determinations and sanctions with a coherent approach to teacher and principal preparation, certification, mentoring, induction, evaluation and

professional learning. This approach will be reflective of the education priorities of the state in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Implementation of these resources will be measured as part of the School Assistance Indicators (Attachment D).

Based on our experience and long standing commitment to education, we believe that with this flexibility, Vermont can serve as a model for other states as we move toward education systems that serve all children.

We appreciate your consideration in this matter and your willingness to grant flexibility to states committed to achieving high standards of education that truly do leave no child behind.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized initial 'P' followed by a long horizontal line.

Governor Peter Shumlin

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style that reads 'Armando Vilaseca'.

Armando Vilaseca
VT Commissioner of Education

ATTACHMENT A

Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged – Flexibility Needed

In order to carry out its plan for a completely revised accountability system, the State of Vermont will need flexibility in accordance with section 9401, in the following areas:

1. Subpart 1, Section 1111 – State Plans
 - (b)(2)ACCOUNTABILITY
 - (B) – Adequate Yearly Progress
 - (C) – Definition, (iv) measures the progress of public elementary schools, secondary schools and local educational agencies and the State based primarily on the academic assessments described in paragraph (3)
 - (F) – Timeline
 - (G) – Annual Measurable Objectives
 - (H) – Intermediate Goals for Annual Yearly Progress
 - (I) – Annual Improvement for Schools
 - (b)(3)ACADEMIC ASSESSMENTS
 - (A) – In General
 - (C) – Requirements
 - (v)(I) Reading and math in grades 10-12
 - (v)(II) Science in grades 10-12
 - (vii) Achievement of all students in each of grades 3 through 8
2. Subpart 1, Section 1116 – Academic Assessment and Local Educational Agency School Improvement
 - (c)(10)STATE REVIEW AND LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY IMPROVEMENT
 - (10)(C) – Certain Corrective Actions Required
3. Subpart 1, Section 1119 – Qualifications for Teachers and Paraprofessionals
 - (a)TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS AND MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

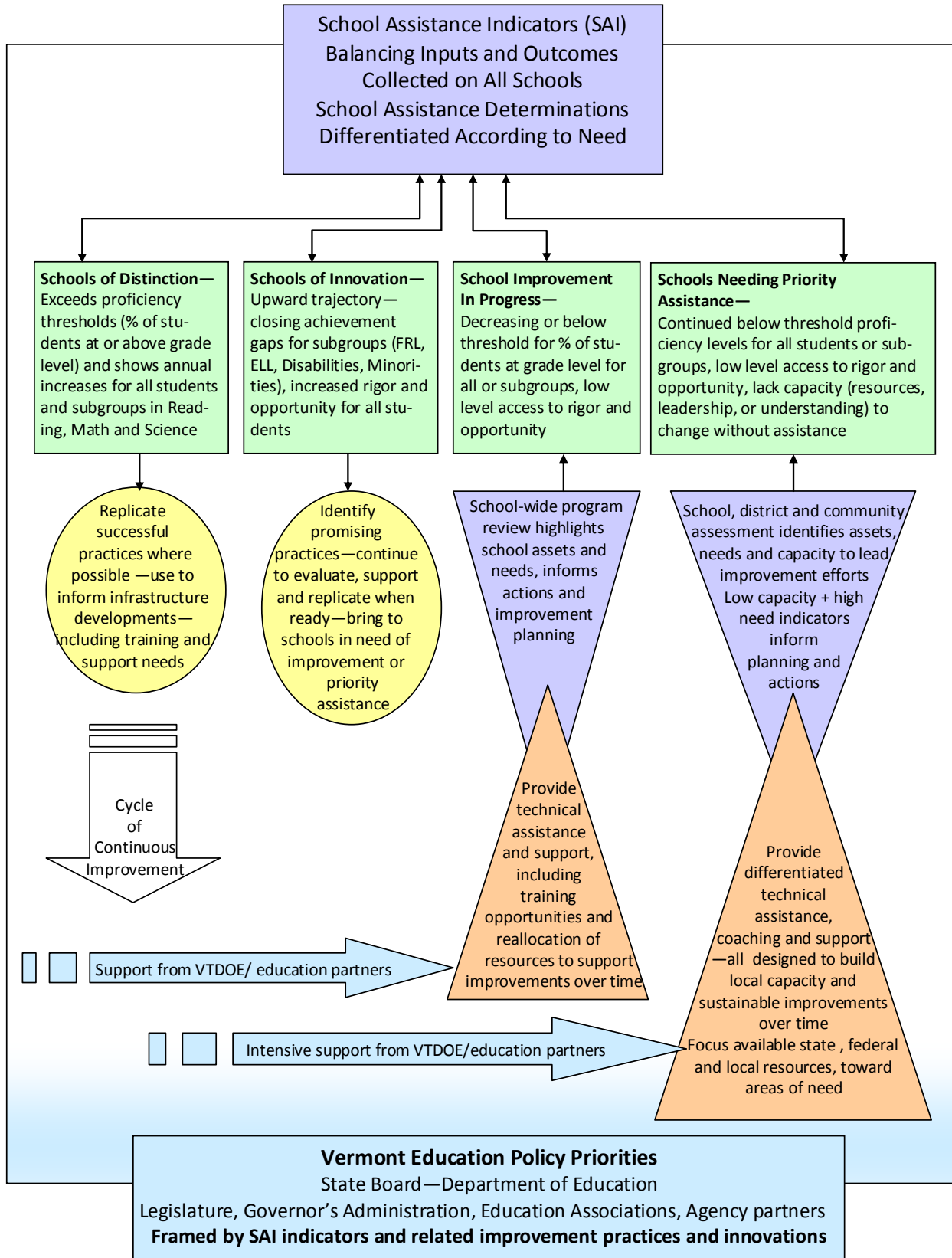
ATTACHMENT B

Political Action to Support Closing Gaps in Learning and Post-Secondary Success

Recent political actions in Vermont support these changes and guide our goals:

- 2009 – State legislature passed Act 44, eliminating the need for students to “drop out” to access the High School Completion Program, established goal of 100% graduation by 2020.
- 2009 – State Board of Education established the Transformation Policy Commission. The policy commission’s final report, *Opportunity to Learn, Defining Vermont Education for a New Generation of Learners, December 2009*, made policy recommendations in six major areas: Educator Quality, Education Quality Standards, Learning Standards for a New Generation of Learners, Education Districts, and PK-16 Partnerships to support transitions.
- 2009 – State Board of Education/Department of Education – *Framework for a Transformative Education in Vermont* – reaching high expectations for all learners.
- 2009 – the *Compact with the State of Vermont—Higher Expectations for Vermont: The Sixty Percent Solution* – 60% of the population earning at minimum an associates degree by 2020.
- 2010 – Act 133 stipulates: “It is the policy of the state of Vermont to encourage and enable all Vermonters to acquire the postsecondary education and training necessary for the state to develop and maintain a skilled, highly educated, and engaged citizenry and a competitive workforce.” This legislation created a 16-member PreK-16 Council charged with developing and regularly updating a statewide plan to increase aspirations for and the successful completion of postsecondary education among students of all ages.
- 2010 – Act 153 – all Supervisory Unions/Districts provide unified curriculum aligned to the Vermont Framework of Standards and provide support for student learning needs.
- 2010 – Vermont Council in participation with the New England Secondary School Consortium, adopted a three pronged policy framework that emphasizes 21st century skill and standards based graduation requirements, multiple/flexible pathways for achieving, and systems that promote state and local accountability for those results.
- 2010 – the State Board of Education adopted a five year strategic plan:
Vision: Every learner completes their public education with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, continuing education, careers, and citizenship. The public education system provides flexible learning environments rich with 21st century tools that promote self-development, academic achievement, and active engagement in learning. It operates within a framework of high expectations for every learner with support from educators, families and the community.
- 2010 – State Board of Education adopts Common Core College & Career Standards.
- 2011 – Vermont House Education Committee – “closing the achievement” gap is priority.
- 2011 – Governor Shumlin establishes education priorities that include at minimum:
 - All students ready to learn by kindergarten, reading at grade level by 4th grade
 - All students receive meaningful exposure to career of interest by 8th grade
 - All students participate in an internship or cooperative experience before graduation
 - Eliminate Carnegie units
 - Eliminate overemphasis on one state assessment
 - Provide telecommunications connectivity to whole state by 2013
 - Provide evaluations that promote effective teachers and principals statewide

ATTACHMENT C



ATTACHMENT D

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS *Coherence in Preparation, Certification, Induction, Mentoring, and Evaluation* *Informed by Student Learning Needs and Outcomes*

Introduction:

Research tells us that teacher effectiveness is the strongest predictor of student achievement—greater than both parent education and race combined. Vermont is committed to consistent educator/leader preparation, quality induction and mentoring programs, high quality evaluation systems that enhance teacher practice, influence student learning, and improve schools. When each of these elements is based on valid and reliable research, supported with adequate resources, and carried out by well-trained individuals, Vermont’s students will benefit and show growth as evidenced by a variety of measures. The Vermont State Board of Education and the Vermont Legislature have taken steps toward the improvement of these programs.

The Vermont State Board of Education included the following in their 2010-2014 Strategic Plan: *Goal One – Educational Leadership: All levels of Vermont’s public education system are guided by effective, transformative educational leaders;*

Strategies:

1. Lead the education transformation effort by engaging appropriate partners in the process of defining and implementing the following:
 - a. Common standards for effective, transformative educational leadership.
 - b. Effective induction/mentoring and supervision and evaluation systems.
 - c. Education leadership preparation and professional development programs aligned with the common standards defined in (a) above.
2. Engage and collaborate with the legislative and executive branches of state government to support improved learning for all students.
3. Model transformative and accountable leadership practices.

Teacher Preparation:

Vermont presently uses a Results Oriented Program Approval (ROPA) for evaluating and approving educator preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate level and alternate routes to licensure. Candidates who complete any approved programs, who are recommended by their program and who meet examination requirements (e.g., Praxis or its equivalent) are eligible for licensure in Vermont.

The seven program approval standards apply to all undergraduate, post-baccalaureate and graduate programs as well as to alternate routes that lead to a recommendation for initial licensure and to programs that lead to additional endorsements. The program approval standards make frequent reference to the *Five Standards for Vermont Educators: A Vision for Schooling*, the *16 Principles for Vermont Educators*, the *Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*, the *Grade Expectations*, and the endorsement requirements. Additionally it should be noted that the seven standards and their indicators correspond closely with the

Vermont Regulations Governing the Licensing of Educators and the preparation of educational professionals. Each program approval standard is further developed through its accompanying *indicators*.

Programs are able to demonstrate meeting the program approval standards by detailing their performance on each indicator. Rubrics to evaluate the institution and program(s) are also provided for each standard.

Vermont maintains a rigorous accountability system for teacher preparation. However, some critical aspects may be missing such as measuring teacher effectiveness once graduates enter the profession.

A redesign of an accountability system for teacher education programs should bring oversight to the things that matter; student learning and student growth, how well teachers have developed and can implement effective instructional practices as well as a commitment to teaching as a profession.

Control of educator quality will hold pre-service programs responsible for how their graduates perform in teaching. Using clear, aligned principles and indicators to demonstrate that students are learning, and that graduates remain in the profession past those first five years is critical.

A strong accountability system for teacher education programs should be guided by principles and indicators. The Center for American Progress in a report, *Measuring What Matters: A Stronger Accountability Model for Teacher Education*, lists such principles as well as five essential components. They are:

1. Every state's teacher preparation program accountability system should include a teacher effectiveness measure that reports the extent to which program graduates help their K-12 students to learn.
2. Classroom teaching performance of program graduates should be used by states to judge the quality of all teacher preparation programs.
3. Program graduates' persistence rates in teaching should be reported for every teacher preparation program. Public disclosure of this information for up to five years post-completion will stimulate progress in addressing high teacher turnover rates by drawing attention from teacher education programs, schools, districts, and policymakers.
4. Feedback surveys from preparation program graduates and from their employers should be part of state program accountability. The findings should be made public and used as a key performance indicator by all states to judge the quality of every teacher preparation program.
5. A new system of teacher licensure tests should be designed and implemented for state accountability as an indicator of program quality. The number of tests now in use should be cut by more than 90 percent, and every state should adopt the same tests and the same pass rate policies.

Vermont's commitment is also demonstrated by the establishment of a Committee on Mentoring (Act 20), and the Vermont Task Force on Teacher/Leader Effectiveness. As Vermont moves forward, these groups will provide the necessary guidance to the public schools as they strive to close the achievement gap. Over the next three years, action steps will be taken to ensure that

each Vermont public school has a quality mentoring program and an effective teacher/leader evaluation system in place.

Mentoring and Induction:

The first two to five years of a teacher's career are formative and require much support from both the administration and the teacher's colleagues. This induction phase is when a teacher gains knowledge in effective instructional strategies, student assessments, the norms of the school and district, and receives much on-the-job training along the way. One component of the induction period is mentoring. Currently, the State of Vermont has regulations that require each district to have a mentoring program. The School Quality Standards state, "Mentoring shall be a structured component of each school's needs-based professional development system."

This past legislative session, Act 20, *An act relating to providing mentoring support for teachers, new principals, and new technical center directors*, was enacted. The first part of this law requires school districts to provide mentoring for new principals and technical center directors. Mentoring support based on best practices and research-based approaches for new administrators promotes excellent leadership qualities that are vital to a school's success.

Act 20 also includes the creation of, "a committee to study how the education profession inducts and mentors new teachers and to recommend legislative changes that would help new teachers to develop strong skills in their initial years and that would increase the retention of high-quality teachers." The committee's report to the Legislature includes but is not limited to: information about successful mentoring programs; the components of effective induction and mentoring programs that meet established standards; qualifications for mentors; effective mentoring activities, training of mentors, and information on mentoring standards and their enforcement.

Mentoring and induction programs significantly increase retention rates upwards to 95% when new teachers are provided: trained mentors; administrator support; common planning time; embedded, on-going professional development in classroom management and instructional practices; and the opportunity to serve in professional learning communities. Even when retention is not prevalent, mentoring programs have the potential to change the professional culture of a school improving student learning and achievement.

These steps are indicative of Vermont's commitment to improved support for teachers and administrators at the beginning of their careers, providing these professionals with the necessary tools to increase their effectiveness in offering students every opportunity to achieve to the best of their abilities.

Teacher/Leader Effectiveness:

The Vermont Department of Education and Vermont-NEA are facilitating the Vermont Task Force on Teacher/Leader Effectiveness, which began in April 2011. This task force is made up of education stakeholders from across the state and meets on a monthly basis. The task force is studying best practices and research-based evaluation systems. Principles and Standards will be developed as the task force prepares its report due in June of 2012. The standards, as developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, are one example that will be reviewed as a part of this process.

The task force believes that the ultimate purpose of teacher/leader evaluation is to improve teaching and learning. By using multiple measures in an effective evaluation system, teachers and leaders will inform their professional practice and in turn, improve student learning and student growth. A formative rather than summative approach has beneficial results with student achievement.

The task force has determined that effective teacher evaluations must include evidence from instructional practice, growth and contributions, and student learning and growth. Examples of what could be included in these three areas are:

- *Instructional Practice*: self-assessment; portfolios; observations; artifacts; using multi-year trends to show growth in student learning through many multiple measures
- *Growth and Contributions*: Mentoring other teachers; leadership roles; professional development; family engagement; growth plans
- *Student Learning and Growth*: achievement scores on validated nationally normed assessments; growth in performance on classroom, school, and district curriculum-based evaluations; portfolios; projects

It is understood by all members of the task force that effective evaluations must be carried out regularly by highly trained evaluators. Ongoing training for evaluators must be included in any meaningful evaluation system. Appropriate supports and resources are necessary in every school district.

Accountability measures for teachers and leaders, when carried out appropriately, promote and support high quality educators at every level in the public schools. Vermont is committed to supporting its teachers and leaders and intends to attract and retain the best and the brightest for our public schools.

Conclusion:

Excellence in education is a major focus of the state of Vermont. New accountability measures will target those areas in need of improvement in the public schools. Accountability measures are just one component of an excellent public school system, however. Good working conditions for educational employees provide students with the learning conditions necessary to be college and career ready and grow into productive adults. Acknowledgement and support must also be given to influences that impact students from outside the school setting. Childhood poverty persists as the major deterrent to student learning at all levels. Other societal challenges, such as homelessness and unemployment also affect student learning. The state of Vermont and its communities will work to develop strategies to support these students.