

## Chapter 1

# A Call to Action: Renewing Vermont's Commitment to Quality Secondary Education

*“We have learned that we cannot mandate  
what matters to effective practice;  
the challenge lies in understanding how policy  
can enable and facilitate it.”*

Milbrey McLaughlin, as cited in  
*Dynamics of Change in High School Teaching:  
A Study of Innovation in Five Professional  
Development Schools*

In 1999, the State Board of Education charged the Vermont Department of Education with the task of identifying critical issues facing Vermont high schools as they organized “secondary schools” to better prepare young people to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Former Education Commissioner Marc Hull and former Deputy Commissioner Marge Petit then formed the High School Task Force, challenging a group of educators and community leaders to assess the current situation in our high schools and recommend changes that would improve learning for all Vermont high school students. Over the next two years, Task Force members reviewed national and international literature on high school reform and renewal. We also attended national conferences and consulted with educators from around the country who also are engaged in high school renewal; we studied the current state of affairs in Vermont secondary schools. In *High Schools on the Move*, we have proposed a set of recommendations that may guide high school reform efforts over the next several years.

As the Task Force began its work, members realized the importance of establishing a clear sense of the current reality in Vermont high schools and their communities. While we can report that we found much to celebrate, we concluded that our secondary education system cries out for attention. In general, more students than ever are graduating from high school and more are going on to some form of post-secondary education. However, many high schools have become impersonal institutions where individual dreams and talents easily are lost as students struggle to meet uniform curriculum requirements and accumulate Carnegie units. As a result, students with college aspirations focus their energies myopically on achieving competitive grades and test scores while students without clear college aspirations drift through four years of high school without an organizing purpose. During our discussions of research and current theory, the need for substantive change in Vermont secondary education became abundantly clear.





In this report, we have concluded that programs narrowly designed to suit only one traditional pathway cannot engage all students in developing their full potentials or help them realize their personal dreams. Narrowly defined pathways hinder the development of students who attend classes without meaningful, personal investment or engagement in creating their own futures. Twenty percent of Vermont high school freshman do not graduate in four years. They drop out disenchanted and face greatly diminished prospects as members of their communities. Many students who go on to post-secondary education change their majors several times; half do not graduate from college within six years. The economic and the emotional impacts of lost opportunities can be devastating for individual students and their families as well as the state as a whole.

We can no longer expect high schools to prepare 21<sup>st</sup>-century students for adult life by sealing them off from the challenges they will face as active members of their communities. We need to encourage our young people to use the impressive educational and natural resources available in Vermont communities to clarify their aspirations and develop the academic skills and knowledge they will need to fulfill their hopes. The research is clear: young adults need broad background knowledge that strengthens engagement in community affairs - in work, service, artistic expression and higher learning. We believe that a high school education should help students use their learning to manage and direct their own lives, inspiring them as well to join others to improve life within their communities.

## **Personalized high school learning**

The High School Task Force identified Twelve Principles as a guide for high school renewal and innovation in Vermont. Progress toward the Twelve Principles is already well under way, developed incrementally over the past 20 years by high school students, teachers, administrators and community members working to improve the “fit” between individual students and school programs. The instances of effective practice cited here demonstrate that the Principles can be applied to a wide range of conditions within Vermont’s communities; they also indicate that the whole range of effective school practices have not yet been developed in any single high school. *High Schools on the Move’s* sustainable, systemwide change recognizes the difficulties we will face and simultaneously infuses hope for what we can achieve by working together.

We believe that Vermont high schools can become places where all students are deeply cared for, where they actively choose among many different pathways toward adult engagement and where they learn to meet the high standards outlined in *Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*. As generally expressed in Vermont’s Vital Results, each graduate of a Vermont high school should have demonstrated readiness to assume adult roles in the community:

- Gathering information and communicating their understanding in a wide variety of media
- Using knowledge to meet the challenges of life in a complex democratic society

- Assuming responsibility for their own decisions and actions
- Working cooperatively with others in the community to solve problems
- Assembling essential knowledge and practicing the flexible skills that support a lifetime of learning

As reflected in Vermont's Fields of Knowledge, the information needed to solve complex problems in an expanding community must come from multiple sources—arts, languages, literature, history, social sciences, mathematics, science and technology.

We have concluded that there is simply no uniform or right way to get all students engaged in learning. The Twelve Principles are designed to encourage wide ranging exploration of the many ways to explore personalized learning, fulfilling individual goals while meeting common standards. Five years from now, the high school experience will be organized to confront challenges in the adult world, helping students with different talents and aspirations use information to solve the problems they will face after graduation. Working with a team that includes parents, teachers and community mentors, each student can develop:

- A personal learning plan (PLP) describing the pathway he or she has selected with his or her parent(s) to accomplish goals that become increasingly clear as the student gathers knowledge and experience
- A portfolio expressing the talents, skills and knowledge he or she has gathered in meeting Vermont's standards
- Community exhibitions at which he or she demonstrates what he or she knows and how that knowledge fits future plans
- Standards-based transcripts that track his or her progress toward personal goals and common expectations

Rather than walled enclaves protecting young adults from the world they will govern, the high school can become a wheel with a solid hub, connecting students to learning opportunities in their communities.

Developing PLPs and assembling portfolios of evidence showing readiness for the adult world will require that all students have access to teachers who understand how content knowledge relates to student goals, and who:

- Understand their content well enough to forge connections between student aspirations and learning opportunities in their communities
- Understand learning styles and learning theories that explain individual differences
- Understand how the learning process changes with age, experience and growing expertise
- Create opportunities for students to interact with caring adults and peers
- Design learning experiences relevant and applicable to adult challenges
- Possess the instructional expertise needed to fit learning activities to different student talents and interests
- Practice a variety of techniques to engage different students in learning





We recognize that for many high school teachers, seeing content areas as ways to understand how the world works may require several years of collaborative exploration and experimentation.

### **Calling Vermonters to collective action**

Personalizing high school learning may force us to re-invent most of the structures that currently define the high school experience. After more than 100 years of providing comprehensive exposure to knowledge for all students, the high school experience cannot be personalized through a series of minor adjustments. In fact, the system itself consists of interlocking elements that combine to restrict growth. Schedules, requirements, subject areas, credits, faculty roles, tracks, tests and rules have become a Gordian knot, an interconnected complex of practices that makes the high school experience impersonal and unresponsive to individual needs and talents. Changing any component of the high school experience requires changing the whole structure; changing the whole structure depends on communities being ready to support change over an extended period of time. We firmly believe that the time to begin is now.