

## Chapter 3

# Current Realities: Secondary Education, Schools and Communities

The Task Force believes that we can best chart our future course if we start by assessing the current realities in our high schools and communities. Collected between 1997 and 2001, statistics cited in this chapter may provide a general sketch of high school learning during that period.

There are significant variations in size, capacity and student demographics among secondary schools in Vermont. There also are variations in what communities can contribute to their schools, financially or through engagement with the community. Variations are so great, in fact, that the use of state averages is almost meaningless. One might say, “When you’ve seen one Vermont high school, you’ve seen one Vermont high school.”

What follows are some of the salient data about the state’s current system of secondary education. We acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive analysis. Many data we hoped to find were not available, but we believe that this compilation provides an important snapshot of where we are as we begin designing strategies for high school renewal.

These statistics come from published sources, state documents and interviews with individuals working throughout the educational system and are listed in the bibliography.

## Observations on our System and Student Population

### Structure

In 1999, about 47,000 Vermont youth were receiving secondary education in 59 secondary school districts:

- Seven school districts had high schools serving grades 9 to 12
- Seventeen schools were serving grades 7 to 12
- Two schools were serving grades 5 to 12
- Twenty-four school districts had K-12 programs
- Nine school districts had pre-K-12 programs
- Fifteen career and technical education centers serve secondary students and adult learners





## Size

Most high schools serve a single school district, which, theoretically, makes it easier to ensure alignment from pre-K through grade 12. Yet, 24 of the 59 public secondary schools are supervisory union (SU) high schools. These 24 secondary schools are at the receiving end of a funnel with students from as many as a dozen elementary and middle sending schools located in two or more school districts.

While the high schools tend to be larger, they vary greatly in size. According to 1999 data:

- Fourteen schools had enrollments of less than 750
- Four schools had enrollments between 750 and 1,000
- Six schools had enrollments that exceeds 1,000

There is an even wider range of enrollment among the single-district high schools. Enrollment ranges from 90 grade 9 to 12 students in Concord's combined elementary/secondary school to 1,485 at the Essex High School, a 9 to 12, single-district high school. Nearly half of all Vermont secondary schools serve fewer than 600 students—an attribute that many researchers and educators now consider a strength.

## Enrollment trends

Communities are challenged to match facility capacity with projected enrollment. Peak secondary enrollment occurred during FY80 with 49,309 students from both public schools and independent secondary schools acting as public schools. A decline in the public secondary enrollment took place between FY81 to FY91, while secondary numbers from the five independent secondary schools acting as public schools remained relatively consistent at around 3,000 students. From FY91 to FY02, secondary enrollment has been increasing at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 1.37 percent. In FY02, secondary enrollment increased by 0.63 percent (26 students) from FY01.

## Number of teachers

Only limited aggregate data describe teacher supply and demand in Vermont. Data on the number of teachers in a district are submitted to the state with school budgets, but these totals do not identify the grades in which teachers work. The Vermont Department of Education reports a total of 8,741 teachers in FY02 in pre-K-12, one-third of whom teach in high schools.

## Demographics

Most data on the demographics of Vermont's student population are reported only in aggregate form, blurring the variations known to exist between regions. Further, secondary student information is not always reported separately from district data. The Task Force recognizes that each district will face unique challenges based on the demographics of its own high school student population:

- The percentage of minorities enrolled in all K-12 schools in FY00 was 3.16; this number has grown during the past decade.
- According to *Education Week*, 13.5 percent of Vermont's K-12 students are living in poverty, and 11.4 percent of K-12 students have disabilities.
- Alternative programs in 81 secondary schools serve about 1,500 students, or 3 percent of all students; 920 students from 74 secondary schools, or 2 percent of all students, have individual education plans (IEPs).



## Other Attributes of Our High Schools

### Governance

Secondary school governance is decentralized and diffuse. The numbers of boards and individuals with decision-making roles in our high schools include:

- Secondary school students: 47,000
- School boards with high schools: 60
- School board members: 451
- Superintendents: 60
- Principals: 59

In Vermont, there is one school board member per 104 secondary students.

### Schedule and organization of classes

While data are not available statewide, it is believed that most secondary schools still organize their curricula by subjects and Carnegie units, track students by ability and future plans and follow a traditional school day of 45-minute to 50-minute class periods.

On the other hand, course schedules for the 30 percent of 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>- grade students enrolled in technical education center programs follow students' career curricula. Courses are embedded in half-day or full-day programs and may incorporate applied mathematics and other traditional subjects.

### Advanced courses

Eighty-eight percent of Vermont's public schools offered Advanced Placement (AP) courses in the 1999-2000 school year compared to 57.3 percent nationally.

**“School is different than when you attended. There are things you can’t understand.”**

Vermont high school student

## Technical education

About 4,800 Vermont resident students were enrolled part time or full time in technical education programs in the 2001-2002 school year. The programs were provided by both technical education centers and comprehensive high schools. About 130 of these students were adults with or without diploma, while the remainder were currently enrolled in a public high school, public-private academy, independent high school or were home schooled.

## Dual enrollment

Dual enrollment allows students to earn credits toward graduation and college degrees simultaneously. Opportunities are available in some parts of the state for high school students to enroll in the Community College of Vermont (CCV), the University of Vermont (UVM) or the Vermont State Colleges system. A program at UVM offers high school students reduced tuition on selected courses during the summer session. A special scholarship-funded course at UVM, “Poe’s Children,” is offered to area high schools students. A Middlebury College program offers certain courses to qualified students as a community service.

The cost of dual enrollment varies widely. Some programs at Vermont Technical College and certain courses at Middlebury College are free. In other cases, tuition costs are shared equally by the high school, the college and the student. Some courses at Johnson State College and CCV are provided at reduced fees, while regular school-year courses at UVM are available only at full tuition. Decisions about credit equivalencies vary and are part of the local articulation agreements often based on Carnegie units rather than mastery of learning standards.

## Work- and community-based learning and community service learning

Expanded learning opportunities have been made available in many secondary schools as a result of the School-to-Work initiative, which was carried out through 14 regional business/education partnerships between 1995 and 2000. According to data from the partnerships, applied academics have been integrated into curriculum in 48 percent of schools. Career exploration programs are available in 60 percent of secondary schools. Capstone projects (in-depth personal learning experiences incorporating research, work-based and community-based and service learning) are either elective or required in 46 percent of secondary schools. Work-based learning experience is elective or required in 65 percent of high schools. Community-based learning or community service learning is elective or required in 75 percent of high schools.

## What Can We Conclude from Our Current Realities?

Common themes that emerged during the Task Force’s two year study led us to formulate the nine observations that follow, as well as the challenges we face as we try to make the high school experience more responsive to students’ individual needs and talents. The Twelve Principles and core recommendations of this report are our response to these challenges.

**Observation 1:** Vermont schools are graduating a higher proportion of eligible students than the national average, but 20 percent of our students are not graduating with their classes. Ninety-five percent of incarcerated youth do not have high school diplomas and most dropped out in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Challenges:** To continue to raise the proportion of students graduating and to graduate youth who are at risk or who have left school; to increase the value of a high school diploma by ensuring that all graduates can perform at skill and knowledge levels described by *Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*.

**Observation 2:** Secondary school students exhibit more varied and complex learning and social and emotional needs than in the past. In many areas of the state the student body also is becoming more culturally, racially and socioeconomically diverse.

**Challenges:** To know well and to value each student and her or his learning styles, needs and aspirations; to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse youth population who may live in communities unaccustomed to change.

**Observation 3:** Significant disparities exist in access to learning opportunities within Vermont’s secondary schools.

**Challenge:** To ensure access to personalized learning for each Vermont youth regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background, race, gender or educational history, without overtaxing the fiscal and human resources of secondary schools.

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**“It would be startling if all of the graduating seniors of four Vermont high schools dropped out this year before receiving their diplomas. But that is the magnitude of what has been happening across Vermont each and every year for at least two decades.”**

The Governor’s Team on Dropout Prevention, March 1989

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**“Help me to be successful. Don’t just tell me to get As.”**

Vermont high school student

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**“Most students are exposed to a mass of information and take away with them only what corresponds to their personal interests.”**

Vermont high school student

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**Observation 4:** Vermont has implemented a rigorous tool for statewide assessment of student performance—the New Standards Reference Exams (NSREs)—but students face no individual consequences for poor performance and many school districts are not making the best use of test results to improve student achievement of *Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*.

**Challenge:** To develop meaningful, effective and economical models for rigorous statewide assessment of student performance that recognize the unique characteristics of students and school districts while promoting mastery of *Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*.

**Observation 5:** Based on statewide assessments (the NSREs), overall student performance in the State is not satisfactory; not enough high school students are meeting or exceeding the assessment’s standards. Vermont’s *School Quality Standards* require that all high schools implement standards-based graduation requirements by 2005.

**Challenges:** To provide leadership, resources and conditions for all Vermont students, educators and parents; to give all students ample opportunities to master Vermont’s standards and achieve their own personal learning goals; to permit achievement of the goal of statewide standards-based graduation; to ensure alignment of learning goals through the pre-K-16 curriculum in each community.

**Observation 6:** Some Vermont students find secondary education irrelevant and feel disengaged from learning, a frustration often shared by their teachers.

**Challenge:** To authentically engage students, teachers and parents in learning experiences that are rigorous and that students find relevant to their current needs and future ambitions.

**Observation 7:** Some Vermont students feel disconnected from the important decisions that determine their educations, school life and futures; many parents share these feelings.

**Challenge:** To develop means through which students and their parents can make important decisions about future goals and current educational activities and can participate in shaping school procedures that significantly affect student learning.

**Observation 8:** Our secondary schools receive little feedback on how well their graduates fare after leaving high school. We neither have sufficient data to measure trends of Vermont high school student acceptance and completion rates at post-secondary institutions, nor can we compare our rates to other states. We also are unable to evaluate the achievements of students as they navigate into adulthood.

**Challenges:** To incorporate data on post-secondary achievement into the pre-K-12 assessment system and to use that information to provide support and learning opportunities throughout the transitional years to help all Vermont high school students prepare for productive and fulfilling lives.

**Observation 9:** Vermont high schools face many challenges, including unfunded mandates, budgetary pressures, teacher shortages and societal problems. Schools also face multiple and sometimes conflicting requirements—and struggle to succeed at them all.

**Challenges:** To focus the primary resources and energies of each Vermont secondary school on learning, which is its most central mission; to refocus all school activities to serve this central mission coherently; to better explain the multiple accountability systems and requirements imposed on our schools.

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**“We provide waivers that allow educators to teach classes outside of their majors or fields of knowledge. We would not let doctors do the same thing. Teaching is just as important.”**

Michele Forman, 2001 Vermont and National Teacher of the Year

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