

To: The Commission on the Future of Vermont Public Education  
From: G. Gregory Hughes, A Friend of Vermont Public Education  
Date: September 26, 2024  
Subject: The Vermont Constitution, Public Education and Democracy

This is an open letter to the members of the Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont. Vermont lawmakers created this Commission because of this year's double-digit property tax increase and charged them with addressing how Vermont funds and delivers public education. However, in addition to the policy considerations for which the Commission is responsible, there is one overriding consideration the Commission must remain focused on and that is the link between Vermont's Constitution, public education and democracy.

From the beginning of our American republic there was one institution that our founders knew was crucial to the success of democracy and that was public education. The "prospect of [a] permanent union" depended on education in the science of government, said George Washington. "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people," said John Adams. "Above all things ... the education of the common people [should] be attended to," said Thomas Jefferson.

The concept of a system of public education was articulated by Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for the Diffusion of Knowledge." Jefferson's premise was that the future of a fledgling republic rested in the capacity of its educated citizenry to contribute to its welfare. Education became a vehicle through which responsible citizens would be cultivated. The view of education that Jefferson advocated for was actually incorporated into Vermont's Constitution.

This is why two hundred and fifty years ago the framers of Vermont's first Constitution knew that virtue was essential to self-government, and that public education was the primary source of virtue. Vermont's recognition of their obligation to educate our youth is manifested in the Education Clause in Vermont's Constitution of 1777. With the formal creation of the Republic of Vermont in 1777 the framers knew that all the values of self-governing people had to be developed. For the founders of the Republic, public virtue was a necessity that would affect the survival of the new Republic. They believed that moral restraint, public responsibility and ethical values were essential to self-government. Because human

nature was not viewed by the framers as being naturally inclined to virtue, public education was viewed as the state's tool to ensure self-preservation.

The importance of public education to American democracy was not limited to the beliefs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century leaders. In 1916, Vermont's own influential educator John Dewey explained that "a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated." In 1938, when dangerous demagogues were erecting totalitarian regimes in many parts of the world, Franklin D. Roosevelt noted: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education."

We can now understand why public education was a core ideal of Vermont's founders; they knew that a well-educated population was the only means of ensuring Vermont's future and protecting us from autocrats and tyranny. Without a grounding in history, civics, and the ability to think critically, people can easily be manipulated, especially by social media, and authoritarian leaders can use that to their advantage.

The importance of public education to the preservation of our democracy is as important today as it was two hundred and fifty years ago. To prepare students to participate in democracy, they must learn to think critically about their role in society. Students need to learn through experience what democracy is and how they can advance justice and freedom. When students understand their rights, they can comprehend the contradictions in our history. And when they can defend their beliefs with facts and evidence, they will be prepared to confront today's injustices.

Public schools' role in providing children with an education is not just a matter of being exposed to the right content. Students must have learning experiences that teach them the utility of core values, such as respect and character, and cultural values, such as social responsibility, so that they will be prepared to participate in the democratic process.

Public education is our best and perhaps our only resource for tackling the problems we face. Public education is also the best tool we have for creating a more just and equitable society.

Unfortunately, in America today, the public education system—one of the cornerstones of our democracy—is under attack. Across the nation conservative billionaires are funding a coordinated effort to dismantle public education. Under

the false promise of “school choice”, state legislatures are adopting or expanding private school vouchers that drain dollars from their state budgets and public education systems to fund unaccountable private schools.

Some lawmakers and the far-right media try to pit parents against public schools and teachers, and thus divide communities. Around the country efforts to vilify educators, ban books, and censor what is taught in the classroom are blatant attempts to erode trust in the nation’s public schools and justify diverting hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars away from public education. However, when a state sanctions a separate but unequal education system outside our public schools, children are exposed to a higher risk of inequitable and discriminatory treatment. This leaves students who have been historically and systematically marginalized in a public education system with dwindling funding.

The future of Vermont will require an educated citizenry. Failure is not an option here; the stakes are too high. Our current system is not working for our students or our taxpayers. As we look for the root causes of our problems and discuss how to support our public education system in a sustainable way we will need to find common ground. This is where the work of the Commission comes in so that we can collectively decide how to support and defend our public education system. The Commission will be holding public hearings throughout the state. Please consider participating. The Commission’s meetings are open to the public, and agendas and minutes are posted to the State Board of Education’s website.