



Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont

December 2, 2024, 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Patricia A Hannaford Career Center (PAHCC) - Room A208
51 Charles Avenue, Middlebury, VT 05753
Virtual via Microsoft Teams
Call In: 1-802-828-7667
Conference ID: 375 196 178#

DRAFT MEETING MINUTES

Commission Members: **Meagan Roy**, Chair; **Peter Conlon**, Representative Addison-2 District; **Ann Cummings**, (virtual) Senator Washington District; **Zoie Saunders**, Secretary of Education; **Jennifer Deck Samuelson**, State Board of Education; **Nicole Mace**, Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA); **Craig Bolio**, (virtual) Tax Commissioner; **Oliver Olsen**, Vermont Independent Schools Association; **John Castle**, Vermont Rural Education Collaborative; **Michael Lechliter**, Vermont Superintendents Association; **Jeff Fannon**, VT-National Education Association; **Jay Nichols**, Vermont Principals' Association; **Elizabeth Jennings** (arrived at 2:15 p.m.), VT Association of School Business Officials.

AOE: Emily Simmons, Rose Neddo, Jill Briggs-Campbell, Jaime Kraybill, Suzanne Sprague, Maureen Gaidys.

Others: Alison Novak, Chelsea Myers, Allen Gilbert, Amy, Amy Cole, Andrew MacGregor, Barb Wilson, Bill Edgerton, Bob Thibault, Bridget Burkhardt, Cal Hale, Cheryl Charles, Chester Telegraph, Christine Bourne, Deborah Stanford, Doug Bishop, DGS, Dr. Mary Gannon, Elizabeth Burrows, Elizabeth St. James, Ethan Latour, Ethan Weinstein, Emma Fedorchuk, Herb Olsen, Jeanne Jensen, Jeff Francis, Jeremy Little, Julia Richter, Katrina Menard, Krista Siringo, Kristen Toy, Matthew DeGroot, Maggie Lenz, Meghan K, Megan Meltzer, Morgan Daybell, Nancy Cornell, Ryan Heraty, Sheila Soule, Kendal Smith, Tim Maciel, Sue Ceglowski, 802-272-6395, Marlene, Representative Emile Kornheiser, Flor Diaz Smith, Marcy Harding, Rob Backlund, Chris Young, Dave Sharpe, Wendy Baker, Nicole MacTavish, Ken Fredette, Joanna Doria, Clare Buckley, Calvin Cutler, Kim Farnhum.

Call to Order, Introductions and Roll Call, Amendments to the Agenda

Chair Roy called the meeting to order at 1:07 p.m. She acknowledged Wendy Baker, Addison Central Superintendent, and Nicole MacTavish, Patricia Hannaford Regional Technical School District Director. Baker and MacTavish welcomed the Commission. Chair Roy took roll call. Olsen suggested that the report discussion item after the first public comment period as 30 minutes at the end of the meeting might not be sufficient. There was agreement to making this change. There was discussion on the soon-to-be-released

December 1 tax letter.

Approval of [Meeting Minutes from November 4, 2024](#)

Deck Samuelson moved to approve the [Meeting Minutes from November 4, 2024](#); Conlon seconded. There was no discussion. Chair Roy called the vote. The motion carried.

Public to be Heard

Ken Fredette, Friends of Public Education, referenced his testimony provided on September 9, 2024 - [Public Comment: K. Fredette](#), [K. Fredette Attachment](#).

Nancy Cornell, former Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Associate Superintendent, read [this letter to the Commission](#).

Jeanne Albert, retired math professor, current Chair of Lincoln School District Board, provided [this public comment](#).

Chris Young, president-elect Vermont Principals' Association - has unique view of what it takes to educate students in rural areas; there is no one solution and it is a breath of fresh air to not only point to cutting spending as the only solution; education is being turned into a commodity; urged the commission to avoid that trap; education should be a public good.

Chelsea Myers, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association, shared information that she shared with superintendents last week around the federal situation and how that might impact Vermont budgets.

Rob Backlund, Lincoln School District Board member and stay at home dad - has questions and concerns about the Commission's draft report, specifically establishing optimal school size and the recommendation of closing small schools and districts; he hopes we look at Act 46 data and ask if equity and outcomes have improved; equity is a bottom-up proposition.

Chair Roy clarified that the draft report is a **draft**, and this Commission has not adopted the content of the draft. It currently contains all the ideas that have surfaced during the Commission's work so far but does not yet make recommendations on any single policy consideration. The Commission is operating on the idea that it will be helpful for the legislature to see all the possible policy considerations to inform its work. That said, the Commission will be using today's discussion to affirm that concept in its draft.

Subcommittee Reports

Steering Group (SG): Roy said the SG met to finalize the agenda for today's meeting.

Education Finance Subcommittee: Mace reported that this committee spent the last two meetings reviewing the brainstorm document, also reviewed and discussed some data from the AOE and received information on foundation formulas and how they are used/implemented in other states. Leichter added that the chart contains **all** ideas surfaced and does not weigh in on the pros and cons at this time.

Communication and Engagement Subcommittee: Chair Roy said this committee met to review proposals for the consultant and have forwarded those considerations to the full Commission for discussion/consideration at today's meeting.

Data Overview

Secretary Saunders walked through this [Data Overview Presentation](#) that addressed a process update, highlights from AOE reports, key takeaways from the Education Finance Subcommittee Data Presentations and Next Steps.

There was discussion/questions on a school facilities report, the dashboard, how best to combine these analyses, additional engagement sessions for Listen and Learn tour that includes student voice, appreciation for AOE's responsiveness to the data requests, belief that the field is doing the best they can under the current circumstances, appreciation for good intent, helping to understand foundation formulas in relation to Brigham and having that positive connection, data on independent schools, class sizes for independent schools, having a map of specific data, importance of understanding geographic patterns/dynamics, and being able to visualize the choices we are making as a state.

Chair Roy thanked the AOE for their data collection work and noted that this short conversation demonstrated how complex it is to do this work well.

Full Commission's Report to the General Assembly

The Commission made a commitment to being very data driven and have moved quickly but not quickly enough. The operating assumption is that the draft report was created and that at this stage the best thing the Commission can do is to provide as much info as possible to the General Assembly.

Chair Roy said a [draft report to the General Assembly](#) was distributed to Commission members prior to this meeting; she thanked those who sent edits. The report is organized based on background information, policy context and potential policy actions and recommendations. She said she would take the report and review it section by section with the Commission.

Bolio said the [2024 Education Tax Rate Letter](#) was released. Chair Roy asked if that could be shared with Commission members. Bolio agreed and the letter was shared.

Commission members reviewed the first four pages of the draft report. There were no comments.

Under "Current Vermont Context" there was discussion on adding that how much is spent locally is also impacted by decisions made in Montpelier and D.C., spending is impacted by many factors that are not driven by local decision, naming that school budgets are defined at the local level, wordsmithing on failed budget sentence, enrollment decline, changing schools to education system; and healthcare has been cited as a high cost and it is important to know that a significant number of independent schools have left the Vermont

Education Health Initiative (VEHI) and reported a reduction in benefits.

Under “Call to Action” there was a suggestion to add that small rural schools are often blamed and identified as being the problem and that it needs to be made clear that we support our small rural schools. There was discussion: including or excluding specific situations in this section may require a more thorough vetting that we have not/will not be able to complete; a proposal to remove any assignment of blame generally, emphasize that we are all in this together and need to address this collectively with an open mind; frame this instead around the need for collaboration and clarity; this language is here because this group wanted to push back on the narrative that this could all be fixed if schools spent less; adding in the General Assembly and Administration to the “call to action”; keeping the call to action section to one paragraph; unfunded mandates; some acknowledgement of serving students’ needs; window of opportunity to influence property taxes is closing fast. At this point we need high level agreement on the message being sent. There was a proposal to eliminate the middle section, reference collaboration and shared responsibility in the call to action and think about the broader transformational strategies and recognize that we will need to think deeply about how we fund and provide education, and this will challenge assumptions.

There was discussion on hearing from the Tax Commissioner about the [2024 Education Tax Rate Letter](#) and moving the executive session to follow public comment.

Under “Reasonable Timeframes for Impact” there was no discussion.

Under “Data Analysis” there was discussion on this being a simplified version of the spreadsheet provided by Secretary Saunders, including the requests for data as a preview for what the General Assembly will receive and to illustrate the complexity and the data that has been provided, credibility of the Commission, and caution against analysis paralysis.

Under “Preliminary Data Findings” there was discussion on trends and patterns, having Secretary Saunders revise this section with updated information, moving narrative to the top. The Commission acknowledged that a number of edits were being discussed and it would need another meeting to view the edits before finalizing. There was agreement to use one of the other committee meeting slots. Chair Roy said the full Commission meeting will be December 16, 2024, from 8:30 – 10:00 a.m. to affirm the contents of the report and the Steering Group will meet that same day from 10-11:00 a.m. The Steering Group meeting on December 11 will be cancelled.

Discussion continued on keeping the chart to support the work the Commission is doing looking at data. Conlon concurred that that chart would be helpful to the General Assembly.

Under “Review of Potential Policy Actions” Chair Roy said this section contained most of the input from Commission members. The intention is that we are not making policy recommendations; the intention is to surface the brainstorms that have been discussed. Chair Roy surveyed Commission members on if they agree that all of the policy brainstorm ideas go to the General Assembly as a status update. There was agreement from Nichols,

Leichliter, Mace, Conlon, Jennings, Bolio, and Cummings. There was less agreement and additional suggestions provided from Saunders, Olsen, Deck Samuelson, Castle, and Fannon.

There was a lot of concern and suggestions offered for how to make it clear to the General Assembly that these are NOT recommendations, but instead a collection of ideas that need further exploration and discussion with the potential of some not being good ideas at all. Chair Roy said the introduction will be rewritten to make it clear that these are not recommendations and suggested linking to the active document that the Education Finance Subcommittee is using to see the current state of analysis, acknowledging that a link versus a chart takes some of the emphasis away.

Discussion continued on using an appendix versus a link, making a connection between the policy focus and the problem statement identified, giving the Education Finance Subcommittee some guidance on the working document, this is a point in time and updates will be made, inherent tensions in the recommendations is important to name, including everything implies that that there has been some level of analysis when this is not the case, iterative process, timing issue, premature information creates panic, there are challenges with omitting or not omitting information, not taking action today, Education Finance Subcommittee will meet again and can revise their spreadsheet, leaving out mergers impacts credibility as it is already on the table, ensuring cohesion and continuing to ensure substantive equitable community engagement.

There was discussion on adding some component on student outcomes, restating the guiding principles, report will be more narrative if charts are moved to appendices, need for a discussion about the role of the Commission during legislative session, how to add value to legislative session, Commission is not well-structured to address short-term solutions, and this Commission having a role in re-writing the funding formula. Chair Roy will submit a revised draft report to the membership prior to the December 16 meeting and offered members to send her additional input.

Public to be Heard

David Schoales, Brattleboro – spoke about a few things missing; said the list reflects the special interests of Commission members and ignores reorganizing/consolidating administrative centers; absence of quality monitoring in the system; difference between talking about it and measuring it; lack of student and parent/public voice on the Commission.

Steve Orzech, Addison Central School District and PAHCC Board - spoke about how he hoped to have some data to work with as they are desperate for it at the school board level; school board's hands are tied, and it is further complicated by not having data to back up decisions. He asked for school board volunteers to have the data; small schools are not educating students in the best way; small schools make people feel safe, but data is needed; school boards need help at the local level.

Dr. Mary Gannon, school consultant – spoke about representation of the Commission and

her continued concern of lack of representation on the Commission; there are state partners who could support this work and are not represented; there is an opportunity with community engagement to address some of that; the call to action section was not specific in who the call is being made to; she would like to make the call to action to the Governor and the legislature to prioritize the system of public education; the ways in which data are analyzed is important and can come with a lot of bias, she referenced a book called “Street Data.”

Ken Fredette, Friends of Public Education – spoke about the concerns about what are not recommendations and how oftentimes the messaging can be difficult; he applauded the Commission for their thoughtful and transparent work.

Representative Burrows, 12-yr school board member and entering 3rd term as legislator – expressed concern over using the Picus report and asked for clarification on that; asked if there were any plans to discuss the near total collapse of the AOE in the public education’s financial straits; this has been ongoing and we cannot estimate the dollar amount that winnowing has cost our state but everyone on this Commission knows that it is high; and small schools are assets and should not be on the chopping block.

Allen Gilbert – asked what is going to happen about all the information sent as public comments; what he has seen is that a lot of people have done some amazing analysis and it has struck him that people are re-awakened and wanting to be engaged in making things better; suggested having forums once the legislature starts so that conversations can continue; there is a lot more work to be done and more information to be gathered.

Chair Roy shared that any input sent to her is shared with all Commission members and anything that is requested to be public comment, then it is posted as such. There was discussion on entering executive session to select a Communication and Engagement consultant and that time was running short. Secretary Saunders said she looks forward to follow-up conversations and noted that she has given considerable focus and resources to education finance, hiring consultants, providing additional training to the field, and has been involved in Agency-wide cross functional work to understand that it is not an issue around funding, but how funding supports programming and opportunities for students. This is absolutely a priority and an agency-wide focus.

Executive Session: Review Requests for Proposals

Chair Roy asked for a motion to make a finding that premature general public knowledge of the confidential bid materials would clearly place the public body at a substantial disadvantage. Nichols moved; Lechliter seconded. There was no discussion. Chair Roy called the vote. The motion carried.

Chair Roy asked for a motion to enter executive session for the purpose of discussing confidential bidding materials related to a contract. Conlon moved; Mace seconded. There was no discussion. Chair Roy called the vote. The motion carried.

The Commission entered executive session at 4:13 p.m.

The Commission returned to the full Commission meeting at 4:42 p.m.

Conlon moved to authorize the Communication and Engagement Subcommittee to conduct interviews with the finalist organizations and then submit its selection directly to the Agency. Deck Samuelson seconded. There was no discussion. Chair Roy called the vote. The motion carried.

Adjourn

Chair Roy adjourned the meeting at 4:46 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Maureen Gaidys.