

Submitted as Public Comment

To: The Commission on the Future of Vermont Public Education

From: G. Gregory Hughes, A Friend of Vermont Public Education

Date: October 21, 2024

Subject: The Vermont Constitution, Public Education and Democracy

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to comment.

My name is Greg Hughes, and I am Friend of Vermont Public Education.

My comment is actually a request and that is that in addition to the policy considerations for which the Commission is responsible, I ask that the Commission keep in mind 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 concept of a system of public education was articulated by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's premise was that the future of a fledgling republic rested in the capacity of its educated citizens to contribute to its welfare.

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 founders 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.

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.

We need to be aware that when a state such as Vermont sanctions a separate but unequal education system outside our public schools, children are exposed to a higher risk of inequitable and discriminatory treatment. This practice leaves students who have been historically and systematically marginalized left behind in a public education system with dwindling funding.

The future of Vermont will require educated citizens. Failure is not an option here; the stakes are too high. Our current system is not working for 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. My I suggest that the Commission stay grounded in Vermont’s Constitutional history.