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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, and Educators
COPY: VT-NEA, VSA, VPA, VSBA, VCSEA
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Preserving a Strong and Vital Vermont
DATE: January 31, 2017

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Vermont strongly stands against the prejudice and intolerance that characterize the current immigration proposals coming out of Washington, as well as casual talk about federal National Guard and law enforcement intervention in communities whose real challenges stem from the ravages of poverty or racism. We are all Vermonters, and we know the safety and wellbeing of each of us is essential to preserving a strong and vital Vermont.

As Governor Scott stated this week: *"I can't imagine what Vermont, or our country, would look like today, had we refused to allow immigrants from all reaches of the world to experience this wonderful country the way most of us have, simply because they were not born here or didn't share our exact religious view. As I have said, I'm going to do everything I can to protect the rights of all Vermonters and the human rights of all people – that includes standing up to executive orders from Washington that cross legal, ethical and moral lines that have distinguished America from the rest of the world for generations."*

Decency and democracy demand that we stand and refuse to be separated from vulnerable members of our community, who are also Americans and Vermonters. We need to be firm that our communities and our schools are safe and welcoming places that embrace and support all our children and families. That is the "unity" of our state motto. Our children – no matter their race, religion, national origin, poverty status or disability status – have a right to learn and be supported as they grow into the strong Vermonters we value and desperately need to build a strong future for this great little state.

Targeting and isolation of some Americans simply distracts us from our real imperative: growing poverty that threatens to swallow more generations of Vermont children.

Poverty erodes basic human dignity. It leaves our children hungry and tired and angry and unable to learn. It leaves parents stressed and overwhelmed and vulnerable to the predations of opiate addiction. As a state that has seen a doubling of poverty in our student population since 2008, we cannot allow scapegoating to divide us and distract us from more important efforts to ensure that every Vermont child – regardless of race, national origin, gender identity, disability status or family adversity – has the opportunity to grow up strong and contribute to our more perfect Vermont union.

As a state where every day, three children are born to opiate-addicted parents, we need to stay focused on standing together to tackle the hopelessness and disadvantage that threaten to engulf our most vulnerable Vermonters, rather than losing precious time in looking for someone to blame.

You know, and I know, that when we allow disadvantage to take over the lives of our youngest Vermonters, the whole state pays the price of that lost potential. When poverty interferes with education, we potentially lose the child who might have found the cure for cancer or the child who could have been the next governor. Tolerating inequity creates a sense of betrayal that erodes our common purpose and our shared belief that we can build a better Vermont.

Our most disadvantaged children represent our greatest investment opportunity. And, when they do better, our schools have greater capacity to respond to and encourage the learning of all other students as well. From Brattleboro to Rutland to St. Albans to the North East Kingdom, I appreciate your strong advocacy and courage, even when the progress sometimes feels slow.

In the great VT tradition of heated debate, I suspect we will spend the next years debating questions similar to those Dr. Martin Luther King contemplated 50 years ago: how to get every Vermonter to work in a job that pays a living wage and enables him or her to contribute to the goal of growing our economy.

This conversation depends on our shared commitment to the belief that we are all Vermonters, and all Vermonters are worthy.

We can and will disagree at times. That is what the “freedom” in our state motto is all about. Open and respectful debate, however, is what makes us better. Without it, we can’t forge a shared understanding of where we need to go, let alone how we will get there. Above all, we can’t lose the common purpose that enables this free and open debate to occur in the first place.

Thank you for all the hard work you do on behalf of our children.