

Vermont Education: Successes and Challenges

Vermont State Board of Education

As Act 46 and funding get attention from the public and the media, teaching and learning take a back seat. Fortunately, we have a strong and healthy system: Vermont's education system is currently ranked third in the nation by *Education Week*. In child well-being, we dropped to sixth according to the *Annie E. Casey Foundation*. On *National Assessments*, we rank between first and eighth depending on the year and subject. Vermont is consistently in the top ten depending on the focus of the group doing the tallies. But this doesn't mean we don't have significant concerns.

Thus, the State Board's strategic goals are to:

- Ensure that Vermont's public education system operates within the framework of high expectations for every learner and ensure that there is equity in opportunity for all.
- Ensure that the public education system is stable, efficient, and responsive to ever-changing population needs, economic changes and ever changing 21st century issues.

In light of our goals and the new federal education law, the state board [sent a letter](#) to the United States Secretary of Education as well as a memorandum to local board members and educators. The key issues:

What we must teach – Basic skills are important for everyone. But in a world where violence and terrorism command the nightly news, we must teach our children to strongly and respectfully participate in civic life. We must also equip students to proactively address the critical imperatives of global warming, environmental degradation and growing global and national inequality. We must include caring for each other, cooperation, advancing the health of our society and providing robust and equitable learning opportunities for all. Unfortunately, the new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continues to use a narrow definition of learning and over-relies on standardized tests.



How we must measure - The federal law gathers data on what we can easily measure, rather than on what is important. By requiring that the stronger evaluative weight be given to test scores in two subjects, English proficiency, and graduation rates; ESSA diminishes broad opportunities to learn and the skills necessary for a healthy society. Yet, we need the arts, humanities, and civic involvement. To keep the balance, the state board adopted a more expansive definition of education in our newly revised *Education Quality Standards* which also includes on-site field reviews as part of the evaluative process.

How we must address the problems – Vermont’s greatest educational problem is the opportunity gap. With the changing demographics of the state we face increasing geographic and economic divides between Vermonters. If we are to close the achievement gap, we must substantively and simultaneously address the underlying economic and social disparities that characterize our nation, our state, our communities and our schools. With two-thirds of the differences in standardized test scores attributable to outside of school factors, the simple scientific fact is that test score gaps measure the health of our society more than the quality of our schools.

On Celebrating Success – The federal test-based, labeling and “assistance” model (broadly seen as punishment) has not only proven ineffective, it has had a corrosive effect on the confidence of the people in their government and in their schools. It establishes and perpetuates a disabling and ultimately failing narrative about public schools. While not being blind to our problems, we have spent too much time mislabeling the needy as failures rather than helping them. We need to celebrate the glories of what the American Institute for Research reports as Vermont’s truly international class public educational system.

On the Federal Role - We are dismayed that the federal government continues to commoditize education and support charter schools which segregate children and shows no particular learning advantage. We are disturbed that the federal government continues to underfund its commitment to our most vulnerable children, who are disproportionately served by public schools. We are disappointed that the federal government has not promoted a more expansive understanding of the purpose and value of public schools in creating a strong citizenry. We are too fragmented when we should embrace common purposes.

The Imperative - It is time we commit across all agencies and at all levels, to attacking the underlying challenges of poverty, despair, addiction and inequity that undermine school performance, rather than blaming the schools that strive to overcome these very manifestations of our greater social troubles. In the rules and the implementation of



ESSA, we have urged the federal government to both step-back from over-reach and narrowness; and step-up to a new re-framing, broadening and advancing of the promises of what we can achieve for the children, for our society for Vermont and for the nation.

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