

Vermont State Board of Education

Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly

3 January 2018

(This report is submitted in compliance with 16 VSA §164(21), which requires the State Board of Education to “report annually to the Governor and the General Assembly on the progress it has made on the development of education policy for the State”)

Introduction

The State Board of Education is directed by statute (16 VSA §164) to “establish and advance education policy for the State of Vermont”. By law and by custom the Board “establishes and advances” education and education policy by several means:

- articulating strategic priorities for education in Vermont
- evaluating legislative proposals;
- implementing directives of the General Assembly;
- consulting with the Secretary of Education
- consulting with school boards and the education community;
- briefings with Agency of Education staff and others
- rule-making as provided by the Administrative Procedures Act (3 VSA Ch 25)

In the past year, 2017, the State Board of Education has engaged in each of these means to establish and advance education and education policy in Vermont.

Looking back on 2017

- Education policy leadership in Vermont changed significantly early in 2017 with the inauguration of a new Governor and the selection of new leadership in the General Assembly, new chairs of the House and Senate Committees on Education, and new leadership of the State Board of Education. Amidst all these leadership changes, the Secretary of Education is the notable exception, now in her fourth year of providing vision, leadership, and continuity to education in our state.
- School governance has been a front-burner issue throughout the year and across the state as local communities and school boards respond to the merger requirements of Acts 46 and 49. As of July 1, 2017 eight additional unified districts became operational. At least twenty-four unified districts are in the process of transitioning and will be operational on either July 1, 2018, or July 1, 2019. Many of the remaining individual school districts are collaborating with other districts to frame new governance alliances or are creating alternative structures in response to the directives of Acts 46 and 49.

Looking back on 2017 *(continued)*

- Merger proposals were reviewed by the State Board of Education, as required by the General Assembly, to ascertain their compliance with the Legislature's directives in Acts 46 and 49. Thirty-four governance-related proposals were presented to the Board by local school governance committees in 2017. In each case, the Board considered testimony from local citizens and from the Agency of Education. All but two proposals were ultimately approved by the Board and subsequently voted on by local voters. As of December 15, 2017, voters had merged 147 school districts into 36 unified school districts since the passage of Act 46. Of the approximately 87,000 pK-12 students in Vermont in the 2015-2016 academic year, approximately 57,000 (66%) of them live (or will live) in a Unified School District.*

** For the most up-to-date merger activity please see:*

<http://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools/school-governance/merger-activity>

- Proficiency-based graduation requirements, suggested by the General Assembly in Act 77 of 2013 and established as rules with the passage of updated Education Quality Standards by the State Board, have placed significant demands on the time and talents of teachers and administrators in Vermont schools. Faculty, students, and parents alike have been challenged to comprehend and implement new graduation requirements and Personal Learning Plans. Roll-out of these initiatives has been uneven. Depending upon local leadership and resources, implementation has been robust in some locales and minimal in others.
- Dual enrollment and early college opportunities for all students were mandated by the Legislature's Act 77 in an effort to broaden and increase the number of students going to college. The State Board's initial review of program results shows these objectives are not being met. While the number of students utilizing Dual Enrollment has increased over time, male students, economically disadvantaged students, students on IEPs, and ELL students are less likely to take advantage of the program. Similarly, utilization of Early College programs has also increased, yet participation varies by gender and economic circumstance, raising equity concerns.
- Pre-kindergarten, mandated in 2014 by Act 166 of the General Assembly, guarantees ten hours of programs for thirty-five weeks for pre-K services but does not guarantee access. The State Board has reviewed data on usage of the program. The Board is concerned that access to pre-K services may be inequitable, varying widely depending upon socio-economic status and geography.

Looking back on 2017 (continued)

Academic standards continued to be updated in 2017 in order to better reflect the expectations of proficiency-based learning outlined in Act 77 and the Education Quality Standards. The Board adopted new standards for Technology as proposed by the International Society for Technology Education (ITSE). Similarly, the Board adopted new standards for Social Studies based on the C3 Framework promulgated by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The Board is studying standards for Financial Literacy. Also, the Board is conducting an overall review of standards adopted thus far to ensure that the values outlined in the Education Quality Standards are reflected in the standards adopted by the Board.

- School accountability and continuous improvement programs advanced in 2017. In consultation with the Board, the Agency of Education has developed a state accountability system that meets federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements, while reflecting Vermont values. For each Supervisory Union/ Supervisory District of public schools in Vermont, the Agency now collects quantitative data yearly on educational quality and equity. Additionally, each SU/SD is visited every three years by an Integrated Field Review team, leading to local quality improvement initiatives. The Board continues to advise the Agency in creation of a data dashboard to help communicate to the public each school's metrics of quality and equity.

From the above summary of initiatives, it should be apparent that Vermont is committed to innovation and improvement in pK-12 education. In the last four years, the General Assembly has legislated – and the Board of Education has overseen -- significant changes to school governance, education delivery systems and standards, and expectations of students, teachers, administrators, and school board members.

All these initiatives, taken together, create a heavy burden on our schools and their communities. Schools and their communities are faced with significant social and economic challenges -- working folks struggling to make ends meet, more children born with drug-induced disabilities, more single-parent households, greater disparities between rich and poor, and increases in the education property tax.

Accordingly, the State Board of Education advocates that, going forward, the Legislative and Executive branches of state government tread lightly. We urge that new initiatives or mandates, however well-intentioned, take into account the significant educational expectations and financial burdens already placed on Vermont schools and communities.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead over the next several years we see the challenges and opportunities facing education in Vermont in three dimensions:

- equity,
 - excellence, and
 - efficiency.
- By *equity*, we mean equity of opportunity – opportunity for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background or disability. Our goal is that each individual student attains sufficient knowledge and skills to pursue the post-secondary education/training and career path of her/his choice and to become active and contributing members of our communities.
 - By *excellence*, we mean educational excellence – outstanding outcomes. Our goal is that young Vermonters are among the best-educated in America, well-prepared as young citizens, and ready to move on to post-secondary vocational/career preparation and education.
 - By *efficiency*, we mean an educational system that integrates effectiveness and economy -- high value at an affordable cost. Our goal is a pK-12 educational system that delivers equity and excellence at a cost to Vermonters that is affordable and sustainable.

While these three dimensions may appear to be in competition, in fact they complement one another. For example, educational excellence for some students is a shallow achievement if youngsters with disadvantages or disabilities aren't also succeeding. Conversely, achieving equity of opportunity is a failure if weak schools remain unimproved or if the overall quality and performance of our schools are allowed to deteriorate. And none of these achievements will endure if their cost is so burdensome that communities are overwhelmed by education taxes.

The State Board is convinced that these dimensions – *equity, excellence, and efficiency* – are strategic imperatives. Moreover, we believe that it's essential to move forward on all three fronts simultaneously and synchronously. Failure on any front is unacceptable. We believe that Vermont can – and must – lead the nation in achieving education for all children that is at once *equitable, excellent, and efficient*.

In 2018 and beyond, the State board of Education will examine and evaluate every proposal that would impact education in Vermont through the lenses of equity, education, and efficiency. We will hold every proposal before us to be accountable to these values. We urge the General Assembly and the Governor to join us in steadfast commitment to education in Vermont that is equitable, excellent, and efficient.