



Marlboro College  
Center for Creative Solutions

Excellence and Equity in  
Public Education

# Report on Community Convening on Public Education

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## Introduction

This report presents the data from the community conversation sponsored by the Center for Creative Solutions on April 2. The aim of the event was to offer an opportunity for community members to engage in thinking about the future of public education. This report, like the process itself, is open-ended and does not present conclusions. The aim was to provide a place and a model for talking across constituencies, thinking big and strategizing. There was much discussion at the close of the meeting that there should be some specific next steps. The Center is happy to provide a space and structure for future meetings.

### The structure of the discussions:

Participants were divided into two groups. One group in one room was focused on defining Equity in public education, the other Excellence in public education. The process that took place in each room was the same. Each group engaged in both discussions thus the material below shows two sets of data, group 1 and group 2. For all intents and purposes, this material does not need to be separate as the groups were divided at random. At the conclusion of the first group process, the groups switched rooms. The facilitated discussion was divided into three steps. The first step was to define and describe the current reality of equity (and excellence) in education. The second step was to imagine the future state by answering a hypothetical question(s):

*It is ten years from now and there is equity in Windham county's public educational system. What does that look like?*

*It is ten years from now and there is excellence in Windham county public education. What does that look like?*

The final step in the discussion is addressing the question of **what practical steps that we need to take to get to the vision created in step two**. This, final step, had two parts; first, people came up with ideas for how to achieve the future state and then, second, these were organized in categories of similar items. The material below represents this process by the **category** in bold face and the strategies are listed below each category.

The charts below present the responses to each of the three steps in raw data format without analysis.

## Executive Summary

It is highly recommended that one read through all the lists of responses recorded in the discussion processes. The following summary of each group is presented as an aid to that reading:

## **On the subject of Equity:**

### *Current Reality discussion:*

There was deep concern expressed about the current inequity in society that is mirrored in our schools: some children are prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities offered them in school, others are not; there is a kindness deficit among students in school. Beyond the classroom: school boards struggle with the complexity of the system and the lack of buy-in (manifest in low participation rates on boards) to the current school board system. There was also acknowledgment of the good things that are happening in public education: full connectivity through the internet, breakfast and lunch programs, and the presence of restorative justice programming in schools.

### *What does equity look like?*

Schools (which may no longer go by this name) are vibrant centers of community connections, places where all students are valued and the focus on individuals (students and teachers) is key, with individual learning plans at the core of the curriculum. An equitable education is not defined in dollars but means that every student arrives on time and ready to learn every day and is supported by an interconnected system of educational and social services. Students leave school ready to meet life and its challenges and they return to the community the strong values that they have learned in school. Geographic diversity is not an impediment to an excellent quality education and parents believe that their children's dreams can be nurtured and flourish.

### *How do we get there?*

Engage, Support, Promote, Change, Empower. These were the key terms that were used to frame the strategies for how to create equity in schools. We must *engage* the community to *support* families, students, teachers, administrators to *promote* innovative educational endeavors that see the whole child and to *change* the financial structures to *empower* us all with complete information, purchasing power and capacity to assure each and every student reaches their goal.

## **On the subject of Excellence:**

### *Current Reality discussion:*

Evidence of excellence in our public education was present but inconsistent. There are quality teachers, but not all of them are of the same high quality. Windham county boasts three principals of the year, but we lack student voices in our processes and current staff does not reflect the demographic reality of the student body. High-speed fiber optics are available, but under utilized. Schools are isolated and there is a growing use of schools to provide more than educational services. Finally, there is a knowledge to action deficit.

### *What does excellence look like?*

Excellence is acknowledgement and celebration of diversity, in students, faculty and the broader community and our history. Small schools are present and not isolated; there is robust acknowledgement of the broader community in which our education takes place, and use of technology to develop our knowledge and understanding of it. All students' aspirations are valued and promoted, each and every student is welcomed and recognized and experiential learning is promoted. We have stable and growing student populations, economic stability and have closed the achievement gap so that all students succeed. Restorative justice is practiced



throughout schools and grade levels are flexible (non-existent). There are strong connections to the local community, business and civic. The school financing system is transparent and linked to student outcomes.

*How do we get there?*

Achieving excellence requires the whole community in promoting, improving, expanding the definition of educational excellence to be diverse, inclusive, specific; achieved through inclusive collaboration across the community, including students in decision-making and defining success in rich ways. Change is necessary in assessment structures and funding streams.



## Equity

### Step 1. Current Reality

Certain communities have 'choice' some don't  
Children enter schools from deeply inequitable situations  
Schools across the state reinforce those inequalities  
Communities with more resources handle things differently  
No one is doing enough  
A lot of kids are coming to school hungry  
Parents are stressed by the school calendar  
Teachers are not fully supported/prepared for trauma in classrooms  
Complexity of social issues children bring to school  
Not enough afterschool programs – no state funding  
Some served well, others not  
Elementary versus high school  
Schools are expensive  
Provide for all children, not limited to public schools  
Choice is limited to accepting the student (private schools)  
Teacher awareness of social happenings  
WSE Autonomous  
Some schools have middle school, some do not  
WSE same high school  
Perceived abilities inherently inequitable, socioeconomic, racial  
Restorative justice programming  
Middle class people sort themselves  
Changes in school readiness 0 to 5 years

### Group 2

Most students have access to breakfast and lunch  
Equalized state tax rate  
Different schools offer different courses (elementary & secondary)  
Past and current efforts to create equity  
Real discrepancies  
Haves and have-nots  
Equity as currently defined disadvantages small schools  
Access to technology  
Ability to purchase opportunity is not equitable  
Uneven attendance at town meeting means voices are not heard  
Different schools offer different courses



Complexity of the system is a burden  
There is no statewide accountability for equity of opportunity for all students  
There is a kindness deficit among students  
Equity of funding system the only value statement  
Some schools curriculum does not adapt to different learning styles  
The challenge of understanding the complexity of funding formulas  
Limited access (financial) to higher education  
School board range of decision-making is limited – further impacted by need to understand statutes and regulation  
Too much turn over in school boards  
There is lack of a large pool for school board members

## Step 2. Answering the question

It is 10 years from now and there is equity in Windham county's public educational system. What does that look like?

### Group 1

All children are valued  
Schools are the incubator  
Get rid of the word "school" focus on learning  
Individualizing curricular options and governance  
Resources and services to close economic gap  
Viable middle class no poverty  
Local schools are community centers serving 0 to 100 years  
Communities as schools  
Safe, stable, compassionate, caring communities  
School decision-making based on children's needs  
Children who don't want to be there are "what would make you want to be here"  
Child centered education  
Thriving children  
Thriving teachers  
Joy curiosity  
Schools reflect community each drive change

Equality – same opportunity  
Equity to each what they need

## Group 2

- All students arrive ready to learn on time everyday
- Students move school to school without creating instability in the financial system
- Access to more educational opportunities for all children
- Equity is not defined in dollars
- The value of the equitable education is returned to the community
- Students leave school career and life ready
- Globally aware
- Civic education that makes young people be a part of the decision-making – including serving on boards
- Resources available to support students social, emotional learning allowing them to access academics offered
- Connection between school and business
- Community stability school populations
- Adequate preparation and access to higher education
- Parents believe their children’s dreams can be nurtured and flourish
- Seamless cooperation between social services and education
- Individual learning plans and student-centered learning are at the core of the curriculum
- System supports excellence in education in all geographic locations
- Distance learning is widely used for 7 through 12 grades in every school
- Emerging technologies are incorporated into our small and large schools at a reasonable cost
- Increased buying power
- Robust person-to-person learning continues (is preserved)

## Step 3. Practical steps to attaining the future state

### Group 1.

#### **Engage Community**

- Citizen “teachers” share knowledge
- Survey community for ‘natural’ resources
- Engage Community
- Engage community beyond approving education budgets
- Eliminate school libraries and use one municipal library for entire community
- Improve democratic process, citizen involvement
- Re-conceptualize organization and structure and purpose of schools
- Create community centers instead of schools

#### **Change education funding structure**

- Change the funding mechanism for education
- Change tax structure for education

Equitable distribution of resources within greater society  
Change the distribution of economic resources given to all schools  
Change the economic structure of our nation (elect Bernie!)  
Regulatory and financial decisions are based on: all children's needs – family needs – teachers' needs and system's needs and the resources are found  
Shift to 99% are stable with basic needs met

### **Empowering Students**

Young people have choice and voice re. learning  
Individualized attention/curriculum  
Support alternatives for each student, according to need  
Locally based elementary schools and a variety of publically accessible excellent educational options that offer responsive educational programs more aligned with individual students' needs and interests  
Think of whole education 'system' across/beyond districts, schools (public & private) and geography  
Experiential education  
Study what works at Hilltop/Putney school

### **Support systems for families**

Create schedules, calendars that support realities of communities and families  
Support systems for families  
Empower caring, safe classrooms, schools and communities

### **Supporting educators**

Teacher training  
Prepare and celebrate teachers  
Teachers having a progressive and friendly attitude toward teaching and the students they are teaching to  
Multiple caring adults connect to each kid  
Professional development to support the social, emotional & ethical development of teachers  
Don't penalize educational innovation

### **Support the whole child**

Support the social emotional and ethical development of students  
Support every child – pre-natal to and through school  
Empowering caring safe classrooms, schools and communities

Group 2

**Promoting student centered learning**



Encourage individualized and independent education

Value personalized learning plan process and partner with community organizations and businesses to provide learning opportunities away from school

More flexibility for families to access education via moveable curricula

Conditions that allow for (require) all students to be known well

Support summer learning opportunities to counter summer regression in low income students

Create link between personalized learning plans and promising careers

More attention to practical education earlier – don't wait for high school shop classes

Create community internship opportunities for students with school boards, town managers, businesses, legislators, civic coalitions, town meeting moderator with goal of supporting improved, expanded civic leadership in the future

Support more arts and music in schools

Expand before and after school opportunities for high need students

### **Training and supporting teachers – student-centered learning**

Teacher training in meeting social/emotional needs of students

Teachers trained to be coaches – supporting student-centered learning

Work to create reciprocity of social and academic studies

Values – cooperation – kindness – consideration reinforced – more home-school work on these matters

Assess student outcomes in as diverse a manner as possible

Create newer more representative assessments of classroom teaching

### **Enhancing community connections**

Increased understanding and connection with neighboring communities

Embrace lateral connections

School attendance boundaries are redrawn to reflect geography

Centralize purchasing

Take risks share successes

Support creation of school leadership teams in every school youth/adult partnerships to promote positive school climate (social emotional learning action)

### **Improving access to all early education (0-5)**

Provide opportunities for access to education prior to school entry

Increased emphasis on what it means to be ready for school. More parental assistance

Access and utilize current understandings of best ways to counter the effects of opioid addiction in incoming students

Close the achievement gap

### **Access to higher education**



Keep higher education in Vermont affordable – increase financial aid  
Expand inclusion efforts to families who do not have a history of higher education  
Create outreach programs to bring in currently under-represented voices

### **Funding clarity and accountability**

Create link of spending to outcomes and accountability  
Enhance transparency for tax payers  
Fund social-emotional learning (social competency) curriculum to improve school climate in every school  
Fund exchanges with other schools to broaden curriculum and to engage in field trips  
Work across communities to expand and deepen understanding of current state equity system to more effectively impact and re-create statewide equity delivery system  
Training for school boards  
New local to state economic measure to support education  
Local support and commitment to equity  
Care in money distribution – more dollars without planning won't solve problems  
Adapt 'excellence' as a value goal in addition to 'equity'

## Excellence

### Step 1. Current Reality

#### Group 1

- Quality teachers
- Shift in paradigm to student-centered learning
- Windham SE social competency curriculum – academic/social & emotional
- Collegiate coop with high school
- Small elementary schools
- Ability to measure school climate
- Three “principles of the year” in SU
- Excellent leadership
- Budgets supported
- Uneven quality
- Poor teachers in system for life
- Isolated schools
- Discrepancies prior to entering kindergarten
- Lack of student voice
- No connection between funding structure and excellence
- Insufficient appropriate measure for outcomes (SBAC only)
- How does inequity effect excellence
- Tax payer support
- Role of schools shifting (pull on educational dollars for more social services)
- Disproportionate and unsustainable amount of education funding coming from property taxes
- Knowledge to action deficit
- Utilization of high-speed internet low
- Special education is an unfunded mandate
- Faculty and administration do not reflect the current demographic of school population
- Set of EC measures and tracking
- High-speed fiber connection is available
- Special education inclusion in the mainstream

#### Group 2

- Family support – kids do well
- Excellent teachers
- Kids do well in school
- Middle school student take trip to C. R.
- Dual enrollment for high school students



WCSU after school program  
Specially identified students get support  
Public funding for Pre-K  
Farm to school program – food curriculum  
Options in high school meet individual students' needs and saves dollars  
Mindfulness curriculum  
Good quality food service  
Restorative justice practices in high school and others  
Hands on instruction in math  
Schools do a great job despite stresses and structure  
Pockets of extraordinary achievement  
VT values music, arts and literature highly  
Not excellent teachers  
Some kids don't do well  
National high stakes benchmark testing – too much testing  
Non-identified needs (near special education) don't get services needed  
Gifted kids not served well  
10 hours of pre-K not helpful  
Food not great at all schools  
Resistance to innovative programing (Brattleboro high school and other schools)  
Excellence one-size fits all  
Schools emulating jails  
Epidemic in anxiety  
Not all students are successful  
Declining student population  
Kids not graduating with skills to actively participate in democracy  
Do not do a good job enrolling and graduating from college  
Student not all graduating

## Step 2. Answering the question

It is ten years from now and there is excellence in Windham county public education. What does that look like?

### Group 1

Emphasis on early education  
More connected system (opposite of isolation); bigger vision for all of our kids, we look around; acknowledge connections  
Build a system of connections among all schools  
All kids who go to college, finish college  
Rich way of measuring educational outcomes to validate diverse learning

All kids and teachers in Windham County have their educational needs met  
All kids excited, joyful, curious, succeeding – thriving support themselves  
Community inside school early in the morning until late at night  
Students are ethically engaged citizens  
A wide variety of learning outcomes valued as a path to graduation  
Study and practice of civic engagement throughout community  
Teacher preparation prepares them to create whole community – how to be learners child dev – social/ emotional needs  
Teachers have awareness of their own social/emotional needs  
Meaningful place-based learning, which includes community  
Valuing cultural diversity – celebrate it  
Teacher trained about mental health  
Students learn about and gain skills to deal with racism, classism, gender (systems of oppression)  
Value experiential learning  
Happy students - (a happy student is somebody who has competence and confidence in their education)  
Excellence that reflects the unique quality of each town  
Stable or growing student populations  
We will have significantly closed the achievement gap  
Economic stability of the family allows families to provide kids with capacity to access the excellent educational opportunities on offer  
Family buy in  
Total coordination of education and social services (with each other)

## Group 2

Use of technology to connect us in our isolation (geographic)  
Personalized learning is valued at its heart  
Students, faculty and administration together design instruction  
Education reflects depth as well as breadth  
All students in every school feel welcome and recognized  
Every elementary school is a magnet school with ability to move between them  
Proactive support structures make opportunities for diverse range of kids  
Teachers are trained to actively recognize and transcend their biases  
Understand and appreciate the strengths of diverse class systems  
Confront through teaching the horrible thing we (as a society) have done in the past  
Students have path, plan, quest when they graduate (sense of purpose, self awareness)  
Learning in historical context  
Kids would be outside in community doing this – not in school building  
Different options for kids and teachers to better fit their needs  
People are thriving all along continuum and can support themselves and participate in democratic society  
Basic needs of all families (people are met)  
Learn about ethics in all classes (physics)  
Restorative justice practices throughout schools

Children are learning to learn  
Learning is place and community based – enriches their lives and community  
Tech is available to families at home  
Vertical flexibility within grades (ungraded)  
Community collaboration to support attendance  
Financing system evolves to provide transparency to taxpayers to connect dollars to outcomes  
Curriculum support career opportunities  
Strengthen links to business  
Students are prepared for college

### Step 3. Practical Steps in attaining the future state

Group 1.

#### **Community role in achieving excellence**

Community involvement and commitment  
Build strong community/parent councils to support schools  
Support greater intergenerational involvement (support local community)  
Community collaboration to align with schools to improve attendance  
Commit to learn about current regional system  
Honest self assessment  
Welcome peer assessment

#### **Supporting excellent teachers**

Teacher education tied directly to schools  
Teacher education improvement  
Encourage “cross pollination” among schools  
Hire teachers who are creative and who love students  
Change state from mandating to advising role; use state funding to support maintenance of excellent teachers

#### **Appropriate Assessment**

Develop qualitative ways of measuring outcomes  
Accept diverse student success in evaluation (assessment)  
Make better use of teacher’s evaluations and observations of their students as well as continuing exams and final exams  
Establish K-12 outcomes measures for school climate to demonstrate a welcoming and respectful school environment  
Set high level goals with appropriate measures to achieve

*Super title for the next two categories: Excellence in Education: Breaking down walls to...*

#### **Inclusive leadership**

Elect education oriented leaders

School and administration leadership will be developed

Create school (high school level) re-design teams that includes students (to replace student councils), faculty, administration and school board reps.

Create youth/adult partnerships to work on solving problems (elementary, middle school and high school)

### **Funding accountability**

Allow any student a choice of attending any local or private school

Appropriate funding

Acknowledge we all pay for each others choices

Share special education expenses across Windham county

Establish value of spending public dollars on education

Decrease property tax role in funding education

Revise act 46

Make hard decision on what to cut out – cannot continue to only add

Connect Department of education and Department of children and families to reduce redundancy and expense

Consider a different or better or alternate system before dismissing

Focus energy and resources where students are

### **Student Centered learning pedagogy**

Make personalized learning plans real; adjust educational approach to meet student learning styles and needs, engage community

Give students opportunities for independent study

Create partnerships with colleges and independent schools

Encourage diligence...keep working until the project is completed

Stress hard work as key to excellence

Older students assisting younger

Stress vocabulary (words/precise) are the tools of thinking/writing

Reality check of high school versus elementary schools in future

Blur the difference between high school and college - support dual enrollment classes

Group 2.

### **Citizens foster change**

Citizens insist and prioritize the financial and human resources needed for success for all students

Citizens value success for all students

Equitable access to learning by all students

More equitable distribution of resources in greater society

### **Integrate community and schools**

Create and support community based child- and teen-centered learning

- Initiate inclusive community programming for 0-100 citizens
- Invite community members to 'teach' at school, library, town hall
- Develop culturally sensitive frameworks to help communities transform their schools
- Rethink the concept of discrete 'school' as building, create amazing learning communities
- Expand after-school programs in time and space
- Have communities define educational goals and methods of assessment
- Doors are open – learning takes place in community context
- Open schools – 24/7 to all community members
- Led and supported by community

#### **Promote relationships and connections**

- Train all people to expand their 'in group' (to see and value all beings)
- Train all people to be in relationship with others
- Restorative justice expands to all schools and to all troubled students
- Promote stronger student-teacher relations

#### **Improved teacher preparation and development**

- Support social, emotional and ethical development of students and teachers
- Teachers well prepared to support the student as a whole person
- Subject-based teacher training emphasizes history and ethics of subject
- Educator professional development includes effective training in cultural dynamics: class, gender, religion, etc.
- Improve teacher education and development
- Teacher training programs prioritize the practice of community building
- Respect and support diversity of learning styles and experiences

#### **Expand our understanding of educational opportunities and excellence**

- Replace high-stakes written tests with excellent assessment and student goal-setting
- Revise/expand/change how we hold schools, educators and students accountable
- Avoid 'one size fits all' thinking: excellence is specific
- Multiple acceptable definition of excellence
- Individualized education
- Expand opportunities and options; especially at middle school and high school level
- Empower people with visions of excellent learning to develop publicly accessible educational programs
- Expand our definition of 'academic' excellence

#### **Promote inquiry and reflection**

- Education focuses on learning how to learn, asking questions and taking responsibility for individual and collective learning
- Elevate student voices so they can feel like their voice is heard
- Students understand and value the purposes of their education
- Help students to feel prepared and independent as they go off on their own





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