

## ADDRESSING EDUCATION EQUITY, OPPORTUNITY AND COST: HELPING FORGE THE PATH AHEAD

### A Summary of Major Themes from VSBA Regional Meetings, Fall, 2014

#### Summary of the process

Each year, the Vermont School Boards Association holds regional meetings of its membership in September and early October. In recent years, eleven such meetings have been held to keep the sessions as close to each community as possible. This year, given the intensity of the 2014 legislative debate on education governance, and given the current debate around rising property taxes, the VSBA chose to reduce the number of meetings to six so that we could have the Secretary of Education join us for each session. In a true spirit of partnership, she readily agreed to participate,

The six regional meetings have just been completed. Nearly 600 people attended, well more than double the normal attendance level. This indicates the extraordinary level of commitment of board members, the intensity of the challenges we face, and the interest of our members in hearing from the new Secretary of Education. We thank all who took the time to participate and are hopeful that the information received will be helpful as you analyze your own situation and chart a course ahead. We found the discussion sessions to be very helpful in identifying possible local actions and in thinking through statewide strategies.

The meetings featured a video by the VSBA/VSA entitled *Situational Analysis 2014* and a presentation by the Secretary of Education laying out more detailed information on the equity, quality, and cost of education. Following the presentations, participants were asked to identify strategies for addressing the two most prominent issues raised-- staffing levels as a cost driver and unequal opportunities for students across the state. We have reviewed the comments shared from the six meetings and have identified several major themes. In creating this summary, we are not attempting to be comprehensive nor precise. If you believe that a core theme was missed, we welcome your observations. Send an e-mail to Steve Dale at [sdale@vtvsba.org](mailto:sdale@vtvsba.org).

Note: It is important to acknowledge that one of the hottest political issues in Vermont is the rise in property taxes. Property tax levels are a function of education costs, various uses of the education fund, and tax policy. The regional VSBA meetings were designed to focus on opportunity and cost issues controlled largely by local boards, and that is the focus of this

report. We did not attempt to explore the full range of issues related to property taxes. There will be many opportunities to address those over the next few months.

In identifying distinct themes from regional meeting discussions, we understand that they are all intertwined. They are identified separately for purposes of discussion and focus.

## **Major Themes Relative to Increasing Opportunity and Managing Staffing Levels**

### ***1. Part of our solution needs to be to continue to re-invent education.***

***Many participants spoke of our need to move education away from the historic model of buildings, classrooms, and rigid schedules. Truly personalizing education and using technology creatively can create opportunities to provide more opportunity with fewer staff. The need to re-think conventional wisdom about special education delivery was also identified, e.g, with our move toward greater personalized learning across the board, can we have fewer paraprofessionals designed to help students function within the traditional structure of our education system? Examples of specific suggestions include:***

Free ourselves from current structures to provide more varied opportunities with fewer staff.

Shift to true personalized learning which should allow opportunities for a different structure of delivery.

Focus on Vermont's recently adopted education quality standards which focus on proficiency rather than seat time.

Expand our use of technology and distance learning offerings .

Use community resources on a broader scale.

Expand project-based learning.

Think through how we use paraprofessionals. Are we prone to moving too quickly to hire a paraprofessional? Are there situations where we might better hire one teacher in lieu of several paraprofessionals?

Assure professional development is used to promote significant changes in practice.

Regionalize high school options. Create more magnet schools?

### ***2. Create greater flexibility in the deployment of staff.***

***At all meetings, the strong message was that we must more flexibly deploy staff resources. There are many strategies for achieving that goal, some easier to implement than others. Ideas ranged from district consolidation to options involving the sharing of staff and programs between districts and SUs. Examples of specific suggestions include:***

Promote and support multi-age classrooms. There were a number of comments about the fact that testing and the evolution of instruction over time has created barriers to serving multiple ages in one room.

Promote dual certifications of teachers so they can move more readily between settings.

Hire more staff at the SU level, which provides for more flexible assignment of staff.

Create greater consistency of daily and annual schedules across districts to make program and staff sharing more practical.

Share courses/electives across buildings and districts.

Structure the system to move adults more flexibly, rather than primarily moving students from location to location.

Alter RIF criteria to consider factors other than seniority.

Negotiate employee contracts across broader geographic areas to allow more flexibility.

Consolidate districts or create joint contracts.

Provide mentors for consolidation.

Create regional partnerships among high schools.

Implement more shared professional development to improve ability to share roles and work across settings.

### ***3. Take steps to achieve scale that allows for the greater efficiency in the use of all resources.***

***Vermont's small units often cost more to operate, simply because of their small size. Despite centralization of some services at the Supervisory Union level in recent years, there are many opportunities to achieve greater scale. Examples of specific suggestions include:***

Combine programs—offer them jointly.

Consolidate districts.

Consider closure of some schools

Assure that accurate data drives decision-making—consider the elimination of some aspects of our system that masks actual costs--small schools, “phantom students”, etc.

Combine various administrative expenses—accounting, purchasing, etc.

Consolidate various administrative support systems—accounting, purchasing, technology.

Consider unified payroll, HR management system, accounting system across entire state.

Reduce administrator/student ratio.

**4. Assure boards and administrators have the policies, protocols, data and other tools needed to make decisions about appropriate staffing levels and have the strength and focus to take action.**

***One recurring theme was that boards often have difficulty assessing their district or SU student opportunity and cost per student compared with others in the state or region. Participants expressed a strong need for clearer standards relative to appropriate staffing levels as well as good information that compares critical indicators across all districts/SUs in the state. Both administrators and boards need guidance and support in addressing these issues in ways that achieve the objective without getting boards into micro-management. They also need to be prepared to act on the information they are given. Strength and continuity of leadership are essential. Examples of specific suggestions include:***

Create policy mechanisms for assessing appropriate staffing levels (cost per student, student/teacher ratios, etc.)

Assess staffing levels against state-level guidance

Improve the method of monitoring staff hired for one purpose who migrate into other roles and remain in the school. (Consider policy vehicles for establishing these expectations.)

Provide the kind of data to *districts* that was shared at the regional meetings on a statewide level.

Collect and provide performance data on the SU level to be sure information is available covering all districts.

Assure boards have data on regular education as well as special education.

Address leadership continuity issues.

**5. Consider state-level steps that will support and promote action, remove barriers, or create incentives.**

***In most sessions, there was a request for guidance, support, and, in some cases, clearer parameters relative to staffing levels. There were also suggested strategies that could be undertaken at a state level which would help boards in assuring greater equity of opportunity or reduced costs. Examples of specific suggestions include:***

Perform more in-depth analysis of different categories of personnel—elementary, high school, special education, etc.-- where are the greatest challenges and then plan to address them.

Promote earlier retirements—implement a statewide, respectful, early retirement program with incentives for employees to retire and for districts not to re-hire.

Provide more guidance on the desired state—

Student/teacher ratios  
Use of paraprofessionals  
Proposed staffing patterns  
Special Education guidelines

Consider policies and penalties regarding staff sizes and ratios.

Consider mechanisms that will enforce or reinforce desired outcomes:

Class size (limits or penalties?)

Use of paraprofessionals (thresholds?) (special education guidance?)

Look at social services—how many staff have been created to meet those needs. Can the state create other options for funding them?

Promote sharing of great ideas between schools.

Remove barriers to virtual learning.

Provide more information to school boards on comparisons of educational opportunity, staffing levels, and costs across the state.

Increase incentives for consolidation—Facilities? Tax incentives?

Create smooth ways for districts to purchase courses and programs back and forth across schools.

Address inequities in choice and non-choice towns and look at the impact of tuitioning.

Address complexities in funding for tech centers. (These are barriers to equal opportunity.)

Assess the degree to which current testing and other regulations stand in the way of more flexible delivery.

Address interstate barriers to sharing programs and staff. (pre-K?)

Address current finance system—it encourages over-spending. The incentives are for boards to keep staff in the face of pressure from parents and others.

Provide options for local boards . . . rather than blame.

### ***Other Major Points Made***

Many issues were raised during the sessions. Some of them did not fall neatly into the other categories. Below is a listing of some of those areas of interest.

Poverty is not just a school problem.

We must address health care costs.

Consider a statewide teacher contract and whether it can help achieve the objectives.

Challenge the notion of automatic steps.

Need to engage the broader community in these issues—the electorate often stands in the way of addressing them. (\*\*\*)mentioned in most meetings)

Focus on economic development.

Address residency laws.

## **Conclusions**

Vermont has one of the better education systems in the country. At the same time, we have significant issues relative to the lack of equality of opportunity and our rising cost per student. Current trends are not favorable in many parts of Vermont. External pressure is building on both of these issues and is likely to result in state policy changes.

Now is the time for district and supervisory union boards to tackle these issues. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing them. However, they must be addressed and now is the time for concrete steps.

The VSBA is prepared to support boards in their efforts to address their specific circumstances. Please contact us to discuss your challenges and to discuss possible approaches or to find out who has a situation similar to yours. The VSBA will also continue to work with others on behalf of local boards to help forge a policy path ahead and to promote better information and support from the Agency of Education.

Thanks to all who participated in our regional meetings.

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