

A PATH FORWARD ON EDUCATION

ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR VERMONT



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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

- Public Schools are continually asked to do more and more in all aspects of their charge.
- Vermont's School population is experiencing a decline at the same time that more is being asked of the school that educates them.
- Our Education Funding Experiment of Act 60 and 68 is not working. While the mission of equalizing is noble, it is contextually misguided and the funding system is so complicated no one can make informed decisions about their schools and taxes.
- There is a fundamental disconnect in our population between the desire to have high quality schools and the unwillingness to spend what it takes to deliver that product.

ASKED TO DO TOO MUCH

- The demands on our schools and teachers have increased dramatically in the past 20 years and along with those demands have come costs – financially and in personnel .
- Changes based on educational research seem only add to the teachers load or more personnel in the classroom. That in conjunction with the desire to increase class sizes, is creating either expensive or untenable situations in public education.
- Our schools are being asked to educate the whole child without the resources to do so. Private school at the high school level costs anywhere between 25-50k per kid and we get upset at 14k.

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

- At the same time we are experiencing a minor decline in enrollment, costs are going up which leads to a dangerous combination and legislative myopia. If we fail to re-organize around the mission/needs and simply look at cutting costs, we will reduce the quality of the product. That will result in a self reinforcing cycle of decline.
- The message being heard by the public is to “cut the skyrocketing costs” That leads the voters into a conclusion that money is being wasted and we need to trim things back. The real issue is that our *framework is no longer aligned with the mission, the student population, and the funding system.* The issue is far more complex than “cutting costs”

ACT 60 AND 68

- While the mission of our funding system was well intentioned, it has not led to an equalized education across the state.
- Two crude examples are that Northfield doesn't have a football team while some schools do, and there is teacher compensation disparity between districts for similar jobs.
- What it has led to is a massively cumbersome funding process that gives vague and erroneous information to the average citizen. They can not draw their own informed conclusions on budgets and funding because they can not "follow the trail" from their tax payment to the classroom.
- This is a major problem because when there is a disconnect between funding, spending, and voter authorization, the system is destined for failure.

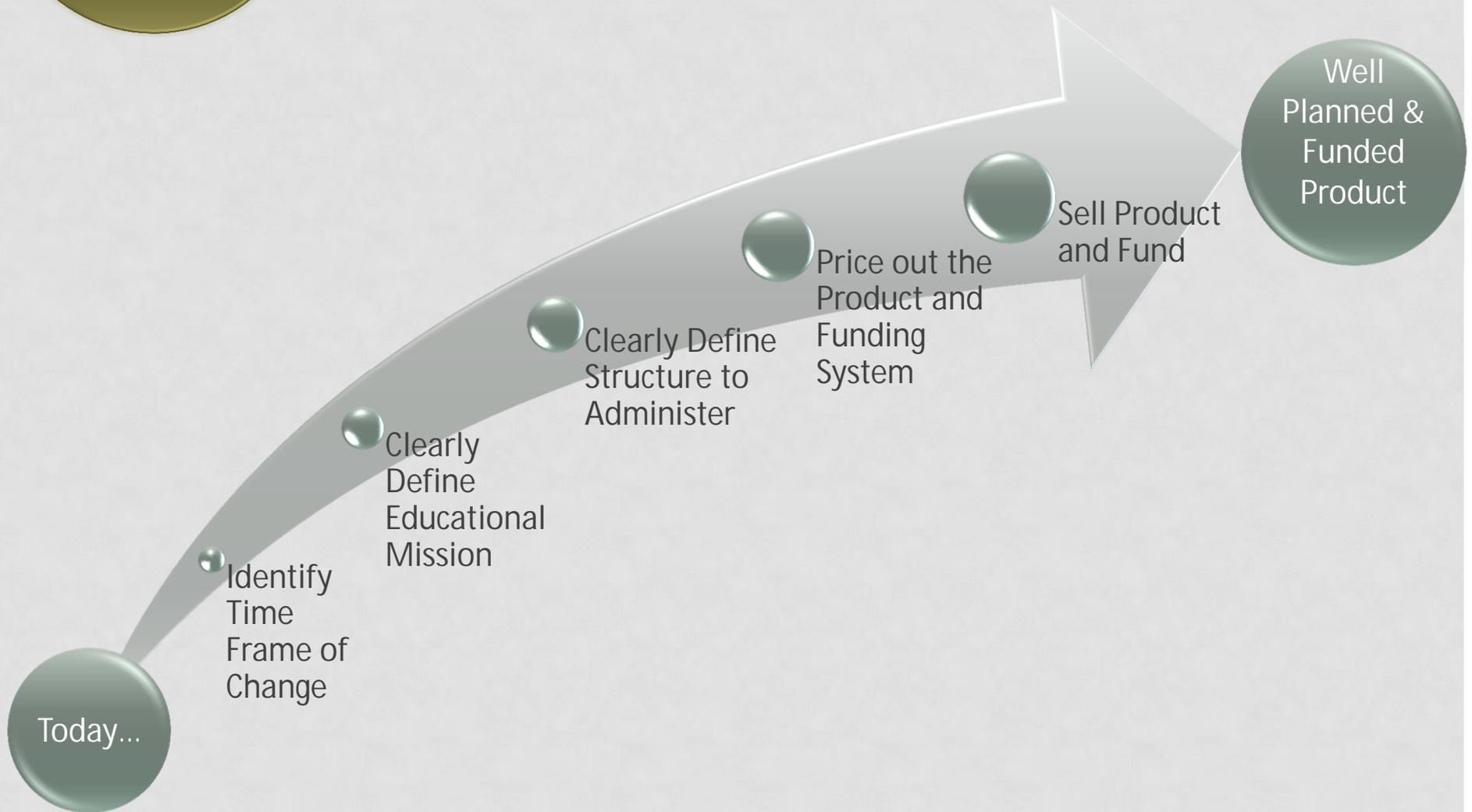
WANT CADILLAC, WILLING TO PAY FOR FORD

- When the disconnect between the authorization (voters) and the product (schools) is so great, there becomes a “buyers ignorance” when deciding on what to fund.
- Whether the message is disingenuous from educational leadership and/or state legislative leadership about what can and can't be accomplished or it is just ignorant to the fact that we aren't funding what we are asking for – there is an incongruity.
- The truth is high quality education costs a lot of money and our citizens need to be educated on that and given the opportunity to make a well informed decision on their willingness to fund it or understand the short and long terms consequences of not funding it.
- Lastly, no one is addressing the fact that living in a place like Vermont comes at a cost. While comparing costs to other states and regions is somewhat helpful, it fails to take into account the myriad of factors that make Vermont cost what it costs – not just in education but in everything.

Product
Evaluation,
Planning, and
Sales

MAPPING THE ROUTE

Well
Planned &
Funded
Product



TIME FRAME

- Instead of trying to tinker with a self admittedly broken system, we should be approaching this as a product re-design and overhaul, or perhaps even the development of a new product.
- Set a Time Frame in Years to have a fully implemented and funded system in place. This gives a fixed deadline toward which to work.
- Without this time frame, the default mode is to rely on the familiar. When there is no fall back, it forces action and progress. Given the reluctance to change the status quo in Vermont, this will be important.

DEFINE THE MISSION

- It is time to rethink what we want out of our public school graduates in terms of their understanding, competencies etc.. The world has changed and now is a good opportunity to design a system that is contextually appropriate and modular in the sense that it can adapt to change without being overhauled – our current system can not perform that task.
- We are asking a home wired with knob and tube wiring in the 1920's to support a modern home with fiber optic high speed internet. At some point it no longer makes sense to try to modify the old system. We are at that point.
- With the product clearly defined, one can then go about the task of designing the process and implementation.

DEFINE THE STRUCTURE

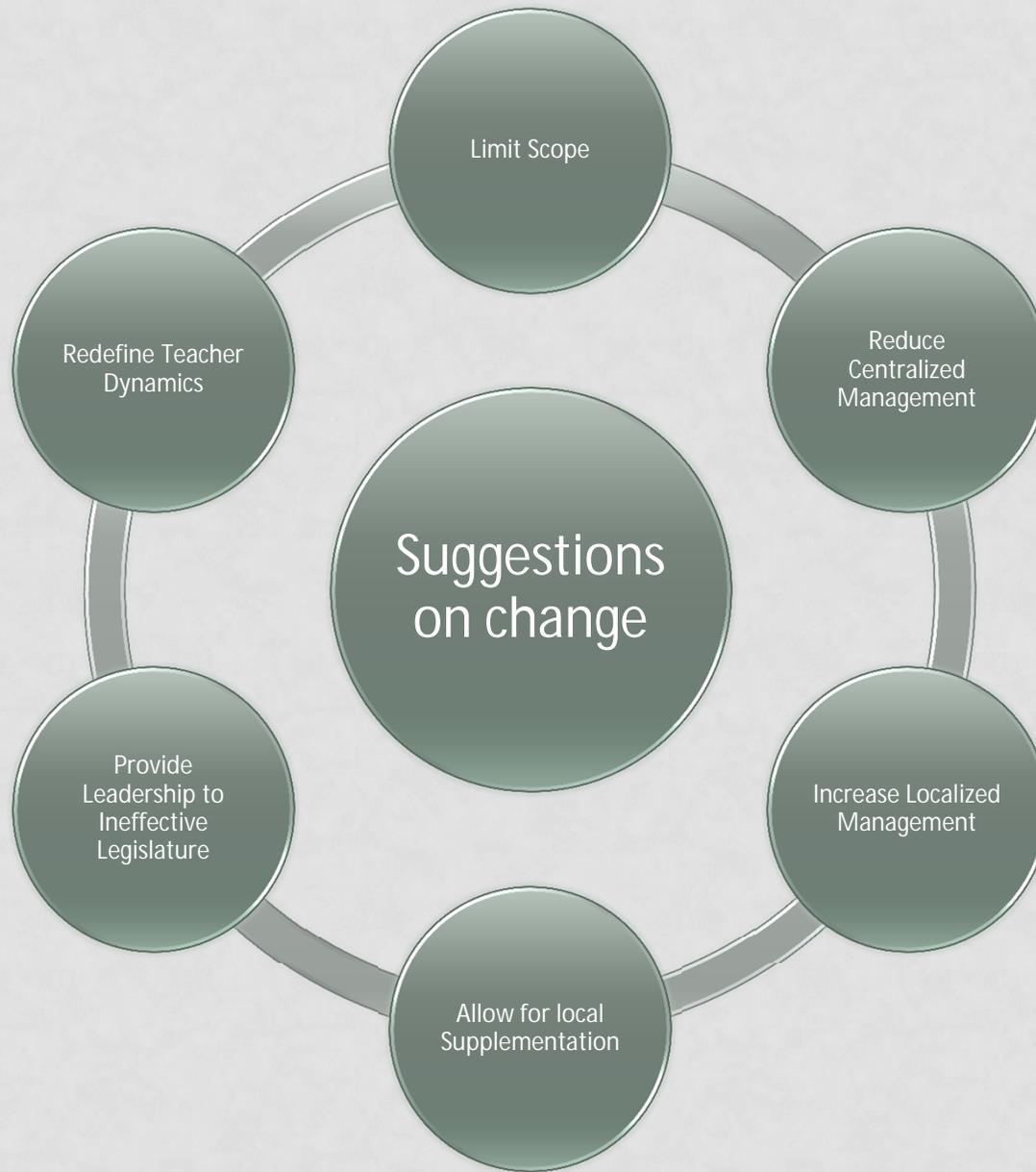
- This is our opportunity to redefine an administrative and leadership structure that is built around accomplishing the specific mission *rather than* adapting a generic structure to a mission.
- This is part of selling change – it has to make sense, be clear, be demonstrably better, and be realistic. If it isn't, people will not accept change. Without acceptance, legislators function in their current position of trying to force change which is even less well received.
- This gives us the opportunity to put in just enough leadership to make things work and restructure leadership to handle the new dynamics of a new mission.

PRICE IT OUT

- Ultimately, we are designing and selling a product. For people to want to buy it, they need to understand its costs and benefits – particularly when it comes to government implemented taxes to pay for it.
- Once we have a mission and a structure that will support that mission, we can then assign a cost to those specific items.
- With that price tag, we can then design the funding system for it, keeping in mind to avoid all the failings of the complications of Act 60 and 68.

SELL THE PRODUCT

- The final step to implementation is to sell the product to the voters and fund it. That is the goal of the process.
- All that is left to do is allow the professionals to do their job and get the results.



LIMIT THE SCOPE

- As the adults in the room, we need to understand that the public will not fund the current scope at a high level. We either need to do everything at a mediocre level, or do fewer things at a high level. The only other option is to spend more which our population will not likely do.
- A limited scope can be equalized across the state, and funded accordingly through tax sharing. This core is what we will decide is the base Vermont Education. Math, Science, English, Civics, Life Skills, etc...
- Electives and Sports will be Funded at the local level based on tax payer willingness to fund. This will allow towns to yield a 5-20% decrease in their budgets should they choose not to fund these things. If they do not fund these components, those kids still receive a first class base education that prepares them for life and their next phase of learning.

REDUCE CENTRALIZED MGMT.

- Create 4-7 Regional Supervisory Unions. These Supervisory Unions will have a fully staffed office to manage the high level, big picture items that need to be managed at the state and federal level.
- The Superintendent will report to a consolidated board comprised of members from each district. We can create better superintendent jobs this way that pay more, manage a larger number of students, and drastically reduce the cost of administration to the tune of approximately 30-40M.
- There are 58 current Supervisory Unions and I am estimating on average about 1.1M/ SU in terms of running the office. With only 5 or 6 superintendents' offices, even at a higher level of staffing, we would go from spending 70M to 10-12 on SU administration. We would need to increase principal and asst. principal costs under my plan but that would likely only amount to several million state wide – yielding overall savings in the 30-40M range.

INCREASE LOCAL MANAGEMENT

- With the Superintendent focused on higher level management tasks, more local management will be required. Staffing facilities, programmatic implementation, schedule etc.. will be returned to a principal for each town. Assistant principals will be added as need for multiple buildings etc... This will allow us to create better paid principal jobs to get better candidates and return the ever popular “local control” to the equation.
- This Principal will answer to a local district Board which will have one designee to the SU board.
- The Principal will be responsible for executing the mission in the school buildings on a day to day basis.
- This increases the perceived and actual “local control” we all want.

SUPPLEMENTATION OK

- Since our base education is equalized and shared, it is OK for towns to add whatever they want to it as long as it is paid for by a separate portion of their tax bill assigned only locally.
- This allows members of the town to decide with pretty clear costs associated to them, if they want to fund certain supplements to the base education.
- Education is not equal now, not every town has a football team, teachers aren't paid the same, offerings are not the same, but as is we all share the cost of those inequities, producing resentment, confusion, and an inability to understand true costs of things.
- This will allow people to put their money where their mouth is, but in no circumstances will the kids be hurt in the process because their base education is taken care of as part of an equalized state funded education tax.

PROVIDE LEADERSHIP

- Our part time legislature continues to prove itself ineffective in solving problems. Their past two attempts have failed either after passing into law or not even passing into law (RED's and 883 respectively)
- Legislatures are not good policy makers. They are good at ticking boxes and making less than thoroughly informed decisions due to lack of time to adequately understand. Most of all they tend to make decisions based on politics rather than a good plan.
- Their roles should be limited to figuring out the funding rather than coming up with sound education policy.
- They need guidance/leadership and a solid plan to sell them on the need for them to take a back seat role instead of stabbing at the wind with these myopic attempts to reign in costs- all the while forgetting the big picture which is our kids education and the subsequent future of the state.

RE-DEFINE TEACHER DYNAMICS

- To make this work, the traditional model of the teacher unions and individual contracts with districts will not work. The Union is counterproductive in its current format and with its current adversarial approach.
- Their position in this day and age is only marginally justified as a means to protect the jobs of teachers in an environment that is not helpful to supporting their jobs. However, in a new model, a statewide contract and a new relationship between a union and the board of education and supervisory union boards would need to exist.
- Without that change the Union in its current format will stand in the way of the very changes that will make its members' lives and jobs better simply because it is "different".

CONCLUSIONS

- Will we save massive amounts? Not likely, but some savings.
- Will we get a better result? Absolutely.
- Will we be able to provide consistent excellence in program? Yes.
- Will we have better Superintendent and Principal Jobs that pay more and attract better talent? Yes.
- Will our teachers have a more reasonable scope of work? Yes.
- Will tax payers be able to understand where their money goes and how we all benefit from that expenditure? They must and will be able to.
- Will we have a plan rather than a triage exercise? Our kids deserve one.
- Will our priorities and structure be realigned with an appropriate mission? That is the mission.