

The State Board of Education's Strategic Plan incorporates two major goals:

- *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 and economic and 21st century issues.*

With these goals in mind the State Board of Education recommends to the Legislature:

1. *Limiting new educational legislative action, so that our scarce resources can be focused on fully and properly implementing recently passed laws.*
2. *Ensuring equal educational opportunity for all Vermont students through closing the opportunity/achievement gap. We recommend expanding full service school models, extending learning opportunities for students, ensuring equality of opportunity in independent schools, and fully implementing the new Educational Quality Standards along with revised Assessment and Accountability procedures (now under development) in all schools.*
3. *Enhancing Fiscal Efficiency, without regressive tax reform. We recommend reviewing weighted student counts, rolling student counts, health care costs, governance and consolidation, the small schools grants, and the use of clear common language to explain the financing and funding system.*
4. *A comprehensive review of staffing in the Agency of Education, and within our schools. In order to properly implement new legislation and the Education Quality Standards there must be adequate state staffing. Likewise school staffing complements require review.*
5. *An on-going review of the Universal Early Education law's (Act 166) implementation and the adoption of statutory amendments as needed.*

Limiting New Initiatives – The Vermont State Board of Education (SBE) calls for limited *new* educational program legislative actions in 2015. The reasons are straightforward. School districts and the state are under severe financial constraints and the completion of work in such areas as dual enrollment, early education, governance and personalized learning plans remain before us. Rather than new mandates, the Legislature should streamline existing programs, increase efficiency, and address concerns on the horizon.

Enhancing Fiscal Efficiency – Many proposals for school finance are being publicly mooted and many more variations will emerge. Unfortunately, many of these notions have regressive effects and would shift tax burdens to middle income and poor Vermonters. Since the recession, various financial shifts have worsened the property tax dilemma.

The SBE's fiscal principles are that cost-shifts must be avoided, unfunded mandates should not be adopted, and any change in the funding system should advance tax progressivity and must rely on broad-based taxes.

Areas for further work include:

- **Weighted Students** – The SBE is concerned about the huge increase in student poverty (now exceeding 40% on Free or Reduced Lunch) over the last decade. This has major implications for schools, society, and educational funding. Categorical weights (such as those for poverty, English language learners, high school, small schools and early education) are common in state aid formulas. Unfortunately, the formula weights are arbitrary, likely inadequate, and need review. Further, dense concentrations of poverty and non-English speakers affect learning in dramatic ways and may require substantially different funding and program considerations. Legislative review of these weights and programs must be a high priority.
- **Rolling student count averages (“phantom students”)** – Most states have a rolling average of two or three years to protect schools from sudden and dramatic population and revenue shifts. This feature combined with maximum loss provisions (also a common feature) has been portrayed as a “free rider” program. While some argue for eliminating these provisions, this would subject towns to even more extreme and immediate tax adversities. The situation self-corrects and does not represent a solution to the major cost problems.
- **Health care costs** are the most rapidly increasing school expense, now representing approximately ten percent of costs. It is too early to be definitive about how teacher health insurance costs should be factored into the state health system. The SBE asks the Legislature to actively pursue and resolve this important area.
- **Governance and Consolidation** – The SBE recommends and encourages local education agencies to continue to study and implement the consolidation of services, in whole or in part. Incentive grants and technical support must be available from the state. (The SBE is aware of existing statutory authority regarding the realignment of supervisory union boundaries (16 V.S.A. § 262) and closing of schools (16 V.S.A. § 165) if the accountability system determines that students are being systemically denied adequate educational opportunities.)
- Much of the discussion of school finance has been hampered by different stakeholders using different definitions. The SBE encourages the Legislature (and other commentators) to use standard school finance definitions in a clear and uniform way.

A Comprehensive Review of Staffing Complements – While many ideas are being publicly advanced to reduce school spending, 80% of school spending is in personnel. Thus, any significant cost savings have to be realized in this area. By most any definition, Vermont enjoys favorable staffing ratios. Yet, little is known about this most important of cost variables. Geographic, temporal, special education, local population variability and a host of other variables affect staffing decisions. The SBE recommends that a study of these issues be funded by the Legislature and monitored by the SBE. Return on investment could be significant.

SBE / AOE Staffing and Support Levels – Funding of AOE staff is disproportionately dependent (70%) on specific federal programs. Meanwhile, the Legislature has mandated dual enrollment, universal pre-school, personalized learning plans, health record-keeping and a host of other requirements. However, there is little to no staff available to manage these programs -- thus jeopardizing their very effectiveness.

Furthermore, with the SBE specifically charged with developing sound educational policies, an independent staff capacity is needed. While the AOE has been cooperative and supportive, the SBE requires policy analysis, legal, and administrative capabilities.

Closing the Opportunity and Achievement Gap – The first priority of the SBE is to reduce and eliminate the achievement gap. The gap is manifest by income levels, ethnic identity and gender.

This imperative cannot be achieved by schools alone. It requires coordinated work with other agencies. Workforce training, high quality employment opportunities, social services, housing, and health programs are all integral parts. As resources are limited, this will require the reallocation of existing resources.

Specific school related initiatives include:

- **Full service schools** need to be explored and expanded. Co-location of programs with AHS must be pursued. There are some successful programs in the state but these often lack solid economic foundations. In the long run, these efforts should save people and save money. For the immediate future, a low cost, multi-agency needs assessment, feasibility, effectiveness and planning initiative is needed.
- **Extended learning opportunities** (longer day and longer year) have been shown to have positive effects on the achievement gap. However, these programs often rely on short-term grant funding sources and are vulnerable to state and local economic pressures. These programs need to be legitimized and stabilized. A more systemic and reliable funding stream is needed which may call on the reallocation of existing resources. Enabling legislation may be needed. (This should be coupled with the categorical weight review noted above.)
- **Equality of Opportunity in Independent Schools** – Any private school receiving state monies should be subject to the same rules as public schools. Independent schools must also employ the same non-discriminatory criteria as public schools in student acceptance

and in the provision of services such as special education. Enabling statutes need to be developed.

- Privatizing Public Schools – While the SBE recognizes and supports the contributions provided by independent schools, it is opposed to eliminating public governance of public schools. The independent body of research shows that such efforts result in inequalities of opportunity.
- Educational Quality Standards / Assessment and Accountability – Closing the achievement gap requires that all students be provided high quality schools. The SBE and the Secretary of Education have made strong statements about the proper role of assessment and accountability. With the adoption of the new Education Quality Standards, proficiency based standards, dual enrollment and personalized learning plans; revisiting the state accountability system is a vital first step in assuring equality of opportunity.

A draft of the new system should be available early in the session. Current Vermont statute (16 V.S.A. § 165) is appropriate and only minor revisions appear indicated. However, the Legislature, Governor, Secretary and SBE must work in close harmony in approaching the federal government about a new approach to assessment and accountability. The SBE requests a legislative joint resolution indicating their support of these directions.

Universal Early Education Implementation and Statutory Improvements, as indicated (Act 166) – The SBE has long been supportive of the provision of universal early education. Now that a law has been enacted, a number of implementation issues (and perhaps statutory amendments) require attention. Among these are the adequacy of the 10 hour minimum and whether the 10 hours provides enough time for needy children. Furthermore, whether the school choice and public/private mix will inadvertently have a discriminatory effect on less affluent children requires attention. Program quality control and auditing standards are needed. The disallowing of Title I funds to support the universal 10 hour minimum has a huge and immediate negative financial impact on pre-existing early education programs. The SBE urges the Legislature to monitor these issues and make statutory adjustments as needed.

Virtual Schools – With the growth of virtual schools across the nation and the unanswered questions about costs and quality, the SBE asks the Legislature to implement a review of this area and to adopt necessary legal protections to assure the wise use of public dollars. With nominal staff support, the SBE could address this through rule changes. Model legislative language is available which could be used as a point of departure (see for example <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/financing-online-education>.)

Student Privacy Protections – There are a number of assertions that “big data” will resolve a multitude of education concerns. These promises must be balanced against the all-too-frequent breaches and misuse of data. Unfortunately, if the information is collected recent history shows it can be hacked. The SBE recommends that the Legislature enact protections on data collection

immediately. Model legislation is available through NASBE.

<http://www.nasbe.org/project/education-data-privacy/other-resources-2/>

Advertising in Schools – Commercialism in schools is increasing rapidly. In many ways, local businesses have been staunch school supporters and have contributed a great deal to schools. At the same time (and in a cyber-age) excessive advertising can be inappropriate and distracting. The SBE asks the Legislature to develop guidelines on the appropriate and inappropriate applications of commercial advertising in schools.

Some resources:

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/policy-and-statutory>

This focuses on food and beverage marketing, but is useful:

<http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/district-policy-school-food-ads>

See also ChangeLab's publications on first amendment implications of restricting marketing.

<http://changelabsolutions.org/landing-page/junk-food-marketing>