



Vermont-NEA Legislative Agenda for 2017

Maintaining strong, effective and responsive local public schools is vital to our state's economic prosperity now and for our children.

School, Student and Staff Safety

Public schools are the heart of most of our cities and towns. Public education is also the single most important way to prepare our future generations for economic success. In order for our schools to provide a high quality, appropriate education for all Vermont children, our schools must be safe places to teach and learn.

In recent years, our students (and the adults responsible for their education) have experienced nothing short of an epidemic of violent student behavioral outbursts. Not only are students (and adults) being physically injured, but their learning suffers when the adults are diverted to protecting them and entire classes are exposed to the accompanying emotional trauma. The State should begin to address this fundamental issue of protecting its children by:

- Developing the capacity for schools to incorporate on-site an array of social services including implementing pilot programs including:
 - Use AHS staff to provide school-based family mental health services so that needs are addressed where they occur.
 - Explore implementation of “Potential Solutions” outlined in “*Report on Act 46 2015: Section 49. Coordination of Educational and Social Services*” on pages 19-21.
 - Working with FQHC’s across the state to bring medical professionals – including doctors and dentists – into the school to provide care to students.
- Expanding the use of restorative justice practices in schools to address student behavioral issues.
- Enacting in statute the ability of teachers and other educators to act decisively in dealing with classroom disruption. Similar laws exist in several states that give teachers the ability to remove a disruptive student so that administrators, counselors, and family mental-health professionals can work with the student.
- Developing a procedure by which mandatory reporters, including teachers, are notified when a DCF complaint they filed is shared with the person(s) the complaint was lodged against.
- Providing grants for school districts and sufficient support for the AOE to implement PBIS in 90% of Vermont schools by 2020.

Help Schools Do Even Better

One of the most attractive attributes Vermont has to offer businesses, entrepreneurs, and young families is our public school system. Locally accountable, our public schools rank in the top 5 in the nation consistently year after year. We need to ensure our local public schools are equipped with

the resources to provide Vermont's children with a top-quality education, so that they continue to be the catalyst for shared prosperity throughout Vermont.

- Student Resources. Maintaining adequate resources for schools to continue giving all students the tools they need to succeed now and in the future is essential to the future of our local communities. Vermonters invest heavily in their public schools, and do so because they understand the importance of a top-quality local school in the health of our communities, our economy and, most importantly, our children. Despite the conclusions of academic studies, students are best served when they have the access to teachers, paraeducators and other professionals in our schools. We must resist simplistic “solutions” that will only result in fewer opportunities for our children to learn.
- Staffing Levels. Despite reports to the contrary, school staffing has been dropping as student enrollments decline. Indeed, there are about 600 fewer educators in our schools than there were in 2009. We believe that Montpelier-imposed student-staff ratios are dangerous and counterproductive.
- School Leadership. The State should commission research to assess why there is so much turnover among principals by, among other things, surveying the pool of potential principals about aspirations to become principals, by surveying former principals about why they left, and by surveying school boards for reasons behind retaining or releasing individuals from the position. Of course, current principals also have important contributions to this research.
- Student loan forgiveness. The state should establish a student debt forgiveness program designed to induce young adults to teach and to teach in rural and/or high poverty areas.
- AOE capacity. The State (every state) engages in “enforcement” and “technical assistance” to schools and other public service providers. The ranks of our AOE have been decimated over the past decade. The State should improve the capacity of AOE to do its job.

Community, Quality and Act 46

Perhaps the biggest reason Vermont's local public schools succeed is the high level of local accountability under which they operate. Indeed, many states clamor for schools that have enough educators to really work with students one-on-one, that are the centers of their communities, and are accountable to local voters every year at Town Meeting. Wherever practical, local residents should maintain accountability over their local schools. Our local public schools are the linchpin of economic prosperity, and ensuring they remain vital parts of local communities is vital if we are to continue giving all Vermont children a good chance at a better life.

- The overall impact of Act 46 will be the elimination of school-based elected governing boards. Their elimination will leave a void in the capacity of a local community to have an official voice in the governance of its own school. The State should fill that void by enacting school-based council legislation.
- Act 46 contains several references of intention to establish equal educational opportunities, but it leaves wholly unaddressed actual ways to do so, apart from a wholly presumed result of district consolidations. The State must do more to attain this intended promise of Act 46.

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It should establish or refine existing standards to be met by every school for every child, and it should confer on the Agency of Education the actual capacity to ensure that every school meets those standards for every student.

- The deadlines in Act 46 are artificial and, in multiple locations around the state, unreasonable, particularly in communities that do not believe they can or should be required to fit any of the preferred or alternative approaches set out in the act. The State should (a) modify those deadlines so they conform more naturally to the needs and interests of its communities and their citizens and (b) increase the range, and expand the flexibility within that range, of options for communities to meet the goals of the act.
- Additionally, the State should amend Act 46 to allow for full implementation and allowance of the “alternative” model of school governance so as to allow Vermont’s communities to retain the unique identities.

School Finance

Vermonters invest in their local public schools through one of the fairest education funding laws in the country. We believe the principal behind that law – that a person’s ability to pay should be considered – should be expanded so that all Vermonters pay for schools based on their income, and that we continue to give our children great public schools.

The state should make the school funding system fairer by increasing the income threshold for income sensitivity and increasing the income threshold for maximum local taxes.

Public Funding of Non-Public Schools

Vermont’s decades-old practice of allowing students living in towns without schools to attend schools of their choice has served local communities well. We believe that the consolidation process underway does not change that fundamental premise: if a merged district still doesn’t include a high school, then students in that district should be able to attend schools of their choice. If a merged district does include a high school, then that school should receive the full support of the residents of the new district.

The state should ensure that all students get a top quality education by ensuring that schools receiving public funding in any form be accountable to the public. The state should:

- Retain the obligation of school districts to choose between maintaining a school and tuitioning its students to attend school elsewhere.
- Respect the rules-making authority of the State Board of Education. We believe that the availability of public funds for independent schools be accompanied by an obligation to comply with requirements that protect the interests of students.
- Cease the use of public education dollars to enroll children in private schools outside of Vermont.

Early Childhood Education

It is clear that children begin learning at a very early age. The state's early childhood education law is a good start. We believe that the most effective – and most valuable – early education requires professional educators in a school setting. We must find a way to expand opportunities for our youngest Vermonters to get a great start on their schooling.

Act 166 was implemented in 2016. While a positive step, it also has exacerbated the gap between poor students and students with special needs and their peers. We must address these inequities; unfortunately, there appears to be an over-reliance on vouchers that will do nothing to increase access to early childhood education nor reduce inequality.

The use of vouchers to pay for public education, at least in districts maintaining their own education programs, is bad public policy and is what the state included in Act 166. Vouchers always end up diluting the overall quality of the programs, and they never truly meet the need of our children from lower income families. The state should change the Act 166 funding mechanism so that it does not require school districts that offer prekindergarten education themselves to fund private prekindergarten education programs out of taxes intended for schools. The state should also consider making state funds available to parents who, despite the availability of a prekindergarten education program in their own public school, wish to enroll their children in a private program.

Keep Pension Promises

Vermont's teachers throughout the decades have worked their careers nurturing the state's future. One of the key aspects of their ability to do so is a sound and predictable pension that gives them – along with Social Security and their own savings – a dignified retirement. The Vermont State Teachers' Retirement System must remain, now and in the future, a defined-benefit paid for by the state and teachers themselves.

To maintain retirement security now and in the future for the men and women who teach the state's children, the state should:

- Continue its recent successful practice of providing full funding of the system;
- Refrain from statutory intrusion into the investment procedures of our public pension systems; and
- Resist any effort to bifurcate the system or introduce risky 401(k)-type schemes for new teachers. Not only will such a process weaken retirement security for new teachers, it will threaten the fiscal health of those who are already participating in the pension system.

Make Vermont More Attractive for Working Families

We share the notion that Vermont can be the country's most attractive place to live, work and raise a family. We also believe that working families will come to and stay in Vermont because of policies that can increase and share prosperity to all of the state's communities.

Among the policies the state should enact are these worker-friendly proposals on which Vermont-NEA works with our partners and allies:

- Increase the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour for all workers
- Work with the State Treasurer to implement a so called “secure pension” program where by workers and their employers can contribute to a retirement savings account administered by the State of Vermont.
- Pursue implementation of a Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FaMLI) allowing workers to take needed leave to care for themselves or loved ones through a state administered insurance program.