



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION  
MEMO  
From the Desk of Jay Nichols

**Vermont Principals' Association Update to House Education**  
April 10, 2020

For the record, Jay Nichols, Ex. Dir. Of VPA, thanks for having me. I want to start by expressing my sympathy to all of the committee members who knew Bernie Juskawtich and especially Larry on news of Bernie's passing. You are in my thoughts and prayers Larry.

On April 6, 2020, I participated on a two-hour ZOOM call with high school principals, assistant principals, and other school level high school leaders around the state, we had 45 people on the call. Additionally, the VPA's Equity Practitioner Network, made up of principals and other school leaders focused on equity issues in our schools responded to equity issues related to the COVID-19 virus. The high school agenda mostly centered around grading, instruction, and equity issues. Here are a few highlights of that:

Some thoughts and themes from the High School Principals Call:

- Do no harm to students academically for things they cannot control.
  - Some schools moving to pass/fail for rest of the year and others moving to High Pass/Pass/Fail. Some schools going A, B, or Pass/Fail, some even giving students options to take whatever methods helps them the most
  - Others still having GPA and traditional letter or number grades but not allowing students grades/GPA to decline during the crisis, in other

words, making sure students grades don't go below what they were before the crisis closed schools

- Leaders worry that if you are grading material are you really grading for privilege and just increasing the learning gap? There are concerns about new learning and the huge equity issues related to that. How much new learning should students be expected to acquire is something that high school principals and their teachers are struggling with
- Some parents pushing back hard that they want traditional grades and assessments others are saying this is all too much
- Most principals are saying they won't be doing traditional final exams and many are saying taking assessments at home really could be testing the resources of the family as opposed to the curriculum knowledge of the student
  - Some will use these as formative assessments as opposed to summative assessments
- Some keeping the same grading system but erring on the side of the student
- Some concerns with teachers not adjusting in some cases and trying to run their classes as usual – which is creating great problems for some students and is a huge equity issue. Principals are working with teachers to understand they can't expect to their classes and curriculum coverage to proceed as before this crisis.
- Concerns about students that are not engaging, how to connect with these students.
- Some schools will give incompletes to students who refuse or are unable to participate in remote learning
- Importance of making decisions but being willing to change them going forward as necessary even after the fact to support the kids
- Discussions about credit recovery, content recovery, summer school options, using the first three weeks or so of school to assess students and see what supports they need to help with gaps.
  - Key is to meet kids where they are when they come back; wherever they are. This was a resounding theme from principals on the call

Some thoughts and themes from Equity Practitioner Network:

- Pace has not slowed down for administrators

- Many are working longer hours than ever and trying to solve problems for which there really is no solution, the stress level is very high. This is also true for support staff and teachers.

Major thematic concerns:

- Online learning is not equitable because we don't have universal access to broadband or one to one devices. This should be provided from the state if there is any hope for equity in online education. That should be step one.
- Parents who are losing income are now being asked to manage their children's education on top of their basic survival needs. The impact is wildly disproportionate for families that were already struggling with poverty, disability, and other forms of marginalization
- There should be free internet connectivity for everyone, everywhere.
- Food insecurity for families as people lose jobs is a great societal crisis
- School leaders are worried about increased domestic violence and the safety of children at home without the physical presence of school
- Act 166 providers are now closed, with districts now asked to provide distance learning for students they don't know and that others have been paid to educate previously. Principals are wondering how they are supposed to do that – I should add here that our AOE is addressing this concern
- The inequities for children of special needs is particularly apparent and troublesome. These are the children that are the toughest to educate and now we are asking parents to do much of the work for which they do not have the training or skill set
- Concerns about planning for next year. How do we hire well remotely. Many school systems already have many openings for next year. How do they “see” candidates teach when there are no students to “teach” in the traditional sense
- We are we trying to have full school starting on April 13 when we know it isn't possible or even advisable. What race is it that we are trying to win and at what cost?

And, I'd like to close by sharing two quotes from school leaders that I found very powerful. The first is from an unnamed principal in the Equity Practitioner Network

- I am blown away and brought to tears by the fact that NOT ONCE in this real life sci fi movie have I heard an administrator, an educator, an instructional assistant, cafeteria staff, custodian, bus driver say NO. I've heard 'How?' I've seen puzzled looks and laughter in the face of the seemingly impossible. I've seen courage and connection and I'm alternately lost, stressed, scared and incredibly inspired by those I work with.

And the Second is from Chris Young, principal at North Country High School and a member of our Executive Council:

I think the scariest part in all of this is that we just don't know what is actually happening in our children's homes, nor do we know what the longer term impact of this closure is going to have on their mental & physical health. I think we can probably agree that it will take quite a while to remediate the academic impact, but it is the social-emotional impact that keeps me up at night. We have students who rely on schools for their basic needs, including food, clean clothes, medication, personal care, and therapeutic services. We have built social service agencies within our schools to meet these basic needs, and now that schools are closed it is likely that many of our students' basic needs are unmet. We will not even see the impact of this neglect until schools are reopened, and addressing the effects of that neglect will take longer than any academic recovery. Given the scope of the schools' response to the pandemic, it should be apparent that the question people should be asking isn't "Why do schools cost so much?", but rather "How can schools possibly deliver everything that they deliver for so little?"