



## THE UNION OF VERMONT EDUCATORS

### Vermont-NEA Legislative Agenda for 2019

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

#### Safe Learning Environments for All

*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.*

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have been widely accepted as a serious challenge facing our state's children and their ability to learn. The trauma these children experience, often at very young ages, are the results of poverty, the opioid epidemic and other major societal challenges. Our schools have become the backstop for these societal challenges and often serve as the only safe and stable place a child may have in their life. Additionally, and as a result, 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:

- Pilot Funding Full-Service/Community Schools – Across the country there is a recognition that as a community hub, schools can and already do provide wrap-around services and supports to both students and their families. A community school is defined as the “center of the community that brings together academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement under one roof, leading to improved learning, stronger families, and healthier communities.”

Vermont should fund a pilot grant program that will allow up to 20 schools to develop the capacity to incorporate on-site social services including:

- Creation of a “community schools coordinator” position.
- Working with the federally qualified health centers (“FQHCs”) across the state to bring medical professionals – including doctors and dentists – into the school to provide care to students.

- Embed AHS staff in schools to provide school-based family mental health services and other wrap around 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.
- 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 and the other students can get back to learning.
- 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.
- Fund a comprehensive study by the AOE on student violence in schools, including key demographic information analysis and the development of model district procedures for dealing with student and staff safety and reporting of incidences. And, maintain an ongoing database of student violence in schools.

#### **School Finance – Eliminate the Residential Property Tax**

*Vermonters invest in their local public schools through one of the fairest education funding laws in the country. Currently two-thirds of Vermont residential property tax payers pay based upon their income. We believe the principle 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 eliminating the residential homestead property tax and moving to an income tax system for all to pay their fair share of their school taxes. This will ensure everyone, not just middle-income Vermonters, pay their fair share based upon their income.
- The state should, as a matter of law, make it the default for those who borrow to purchase or refinance a home to escrow their property taxes as part of their monthly payment.

#### **Health Care – Protecting Consumers and Controlling Costs**

*Over the past decade the majority of Vermonters, including all public school employees, have moved to High Deductible Healthcare Plans (HDHPs). This move was done with an eye toward “controlling” costs, which means encouraging people to not get care when they should. These HDHPs have helped to exacerbate the challenges all Vermonters face paying for their healthcare while doing nothing to actually control the cost of care. For example, education spending as a percentage of Vermont state GDP has remained steady at approximately 5% for over twenty years, while health care costs have grown from 10% to nearly 20% during the same period.*

The state should move forward policies that both help protect Vermonters ability to access their healthcare dollars, while also moving forward innovative ideas to begin to actually control the costs of care. This should include:

- Enact in statute the regulation of Third Party Administrators (TPAs) to ensure that they provide the services to Vermonters they are contracted to provide. This consumer protection issue should specifically include TPAs that provide Health Reimbursement Arrangements, Health Savings Accounts, Flexible Spending Accounts and Dependent Care Accounts. Similar to health insurance companies and hospitals, who are currently regulated by the State, regulation of TPAs should include a clear and enforceable process for consumers to file complaints and seek timely resolution to their grievances.
- Establish a state run and administered consumer-friendly healthcare price transparency database where providers must submit information on costs of health care services for patients to access. If HPHPs are to be driven by consumers, price and quality measures must be accessible to all Vermonters.
- Create an independent commission to regulate prices for health care services, including medical and pharmaceutical, to ensure sustainable costs, transparency and access to care.

#### **Make Early Learning More Accessible**

*In the 1980's, Vermont was a leader in requiring all school districts to offer kindergarten to our state's youngest children. Over the past several decades, research has proven that early learning is essential to child brain development and the earlier that children gain access to these high-quality educational opportunities the better prepared they are to learn as they grow and develop. As the state looks to expand public Pre-K, it is essential that policy decisions don't disadvantage children with special needs or those from poorer families. Vermont's local public schools meet the needs of all students and families, while ensuring high-quality education is provided equitably across the state. Many public schools already provide public Pre-K for all children in their community, and all others should follow their lead.*

- The state should extend the definition of Kindergarten to include four-year olds and allow school districts to make investment in all local students by building out public kindergarten in an equitable, local and sustainable fashion.
- The state should bring the Childcare Financial Assistance Program up to proper and adequate funding levels so that those families that need support the most get it. This investment should come from a long-term, dedicated and sustainable funding source.

#### **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 ("VSTRS") 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 VSTRS;
- 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.

### **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 is essential to the future of our local communities. Vermonters invest wisely and appropriately in their local public schools, and do so because they understand the importance of a high-quality local school in the health and vitality of our communities and, most importantly, our children. Despite the conclusions of academic studies, students are best served when they have the access to high-quality teachers, paraeducators and other professionals in our schools. We must resist simplistic "solutions" that will only result in fewer opportunities for our children.
- **Staffing Levels.** Despite reports to the contrary, school staffing has been dropping as student enrollments decline. Indeed, there are more than 600 fewer educators in our schools than there were in 2009. We believe that Montpelier-imposed student-staff ratios are bad for students and schools, as well as being 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, i.e., teachers, about their aspirations to become a principal, 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.

### Educational 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. While the Act 46 merger process has nearly concluded, it is important to note that Act 46 did not establish specific metrics for equal educational opportunities.*

- 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 measure the stated promise of Act 46 to promote educational opportunities. 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.

### 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 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 and all students 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 rule-making authority of the State Board of Education. We believe the availability of public funds for independent schools must also be accompanied by an obligation to comply with the same laws and regulations that apply to public schools.
- Cease the use of public education dollars to enroll children in private schools outside of Vermont.

### Healthy Kids – Healthy Future

*We know that the health and wellness of children is not only a foundational value of our society but also critical to ensuring they grow up to be health happy adults.*

Vermont-NEA will work in partnership with other children's advocates to develop policies that include:

- Expand the availability of free school meals to all Vermont children regardless of income.
- Create standards for "kids meals" served by restaurants to ensure the availability of healthy choices.
- Support school districts to remediate any lead found in drinking water.

**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
- 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.
- Enact legislation that enables employers to discharge employees, but only if they have a good faith reason related to the employer's business and not trivial, arbitrary, or capricious reasons—so called "good cause for all."