

Public education in Vermont and across the nation is currently experiencing the most challenging set of circumstances in recent history. The global pandemic has exacerbated systemic inequities and decreased access to critical education and mental health services for our most vulnerable populations. Addressing existing inequity in our current public health context presents both extreme difficulties and unique opportunities. The Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators remains committed to our work with our education partners and elected officials to further a number of legislative issues central to our core mission: ***Leadership for the education of all children, with a focus on children with disabilities.***

COVID-19 Impact on Students with Disabilities

The impact of the pandemic on all Vermont students and their families is unprecedented. Children and families alike are not only experiencing learning loss, but the impacts on mental health as a result of ongoing school closures, socioeconomic impacts, and more. VCSEA also acknowledges that these impacts disproportionately affect students with disabilities. The issue of learning loss deserves specialized attention from the Vermont legislature and administration to ensure we address the needs of students with disabilities comprehensively as expected by IDEA. Given this, VCSEA provides the following important points of focus:

- Special education services to address learning loss should be supplemental to the services currently in place in the school day to ensure access to general education (see MTSS comments).
- Vermont should allocate funds along with a system of implementation statewide specific to providing services to students with disabilities who clearly have regression that is not recoverable over the next six months given the pandemic.
- This funding should be specifically dedicated in addition to the current funding structures for schools and special education funding.
- VCSEA also supports the concept of school districts considering the needs of all students who were disproportionately impacted by COVID above and beyond special education populations.

MTSS Implementation to support Act 173

The cost of special education is largely a function of systems that schools need to create in order to support access to general education instruction for students with disabilities. These costs are unlikely to be impacted without significant changes to the *general education* system and its ability to meet the needs of all learners without relying solely on special education services. While Act 173 was developed in part to address this through the strengthening of MTSS systems within schools, there have been few concrete steps taken to support schools in developing or strengthening their MTSS. As a result:

- The creation of universally designed (UDL) general education classrooms is critical to ensuring that general education can meet the needs of students with disabilities. Paraeducators, often placed in classrooms to make up for a lack of UDL, continue to be a primary cost driver of creating access to general education for students with disabilities in Vermont classrooms.
- Mental health services continue to be an enormous factor in the rise of special education costs because schools ultimately become responsible for providing mental health services. This is a result of a deep need to increase investments in childrens' mental health through the agency of human services in order to adequately support children and families.
- The general education system requires targeted professional development so that classroom teachers can create access to their instruction for all students. While this is true for all academic areas, it is particularly critical in the area of early literacy. Primary level general educators require

systematic professional development in how to teach reading to all students.

Maximize Interagency Collaboration to Improve Access to Mental Health Supports for Children and Families

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing challenges with the ready access to mental health supports for children and families. Not only has the pandemic increased the challenges experienced by families, but it has limited access and funding for the necessary supports. VCSEA believes it will be critical to expand upon the interagency collaboration that occurred as a result of the pandemic.

- Vermont must invest heavily in community mental health services to ensure appropriate clinical treatment and support for children and families across Vermont, especially in light of the impact on social emotional wellness from the pandemic.
- Vermont schools cannot do this alone. Clear partnerships with designated agencies and the expected implementation of services through the Agency of Human services must be a right to Vermonters.
- Investment in mental health supports cannot redirect education funds but must be supplemental to the education funding across the state.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

VCSEA supports a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion across all of our Vermont schools, especially in light of the inequities further highlighted by the COVID pandemic. This means taking action related to ensuring opportunity and representation for all identities and addressing systemic racism within the education system in Vermont and beyond. Policy makers and education leaders across the state require training and a deep understanding of the role schools play in developing curriculum and having policies that represent all students, including students who have disabilities as well as Black, Indigenous and students of color. Our students represent many intersections of identities that have been historically marginalized and all students have a right to see themselves as well as learn about others in their community school experiences. Curriculum reviews, diversification of the educator workforce and antiracist policy analysis at the state and school board levels are essential actions that must be taken statewide to ensure outcomes aligned with this critical body of work.

- Curricular representation means that all students see themselves in the curricular materials and lenses used to instruct both current and historical events.
- Workforce diversification to ensure that all students see themselves in the teachers and leaders in their schools is a needed focus in Vermont schools. VCSEA encourages centering a variety of identities and asks for an emphasis on representation of people with disabilities.
- Policy makers across Vermont should receive training in and hold an expectation for ensuring equity centered policy development and procedural implementation. Centering voices of those who have historically been marginalized is a necessary step in addressing equity driven policy development.