
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: House Education
Respectfully Submitted by: Zoie Saunders, M.Ed., Secretary
Subject: Education Transformation Budget - \$4 million
Date: February 26, 2025

None of these requests represent work that is within the job duties of any existing Agency staff. These are one-time requests to support a transition and do not represent permanent work that would be undertaken by Agency staff. However, we will structure these contracted resources explicitly to build capacity of the Agency to support the new districts in ensuring equity, quality, and sustainability beyond the transitional period. Part of our capacity building efforts will involve an evaluation of the need for permanent resources after FY28 to sustain operations – but only after we have done the hard work of reorganizing the Agency, reducing duplication of efforts, and maximizing existing staff resources.

Financial Transformation and Budgeting Support

The Agency requests additional resources to provide critical support through the proposed transition period from FY 26-FY 28. This support will include timely modeling and adjustments as policy decisions are made, analysis of existing systems to measure viability and provide targeted and accelerated support to school systems during transition, and intensive budgeting support for LEAs in FY 27 and FY 28 as the state moves to a foundation formula.

FY26 Focus

- Model financial impact of FY27 state foundation grant and develop criteria to evaluate the need for adjusted funding based on special circumstances
- Evaluate the financial and operational viability of forming districts and develop a warning system to identify districts for accelerated intervention (early consolidation) to ensure continuity of educational delivery
- Provide targeted training and budget support to achieve short-term cost containment strategies in FY27, including implementation of new class size/student-teacher ratios
- Develop budget tools that support scenario planning within defined state budgeting parameters and education quality requirements
- Provide extensive training and on-the-ground support to support 119 districts in a critical transition year
- Develop budget dashboards and tools to support strategic budgeting and accountability to statewide financial and equity goals



Education Quality and Accountability: Academic Transformation

The Agency requests additional resources to engage in a comprehensive review and strengthening of the state’s accountability framework, as well as to support the Agency’s development of a strategic plan that will better support schools and districts into the future. The education transformation could be disruptive to teaching and learning, putting our state at risk for a downturn in academic performance. The Agency needs to provide strong leadership and direction to ensure high-quality instruction during the transition and to build a foundation for educational excellence in the future. We have significant vulnerabilities related to academic quality, and the U.S. Department of Education has identified several findings during their recent monitoring visit related to teacher equity, statewide graduation requirements, continuous improvement, special education monitoring, parent engagement, and other mission critical process improvements. Lastly, the Agency needs to prepare the field for the transition to the new districts/boards by providing clear direction on academic standards and tools/systems to support high quality academic performance, while ensuring high quality instruction during the transition. All of this work will be conducted under the direction of the Chief Academic Officer.

FY26 Focus

- Develop an early warning system to proactively identify schools requiring additional academic intervention and continuous improvement support
- Design tools and resources to support data-driven instruction and curriculum alignment across districts
- Redesign the Agency’s special education monitoring approach and provide targeted support to address Vermont’s “needs assistance” status under the direction of the Chief Academic Officer
- Evaluate data collection timelines and validation processes in alignment with national best practices to ensure compliance with federal guidelines and to improve data reporting
- Provide targeted, on-the-ground school improvement planning and support to address vulnerabilities and equip schools and districts with the tools and resources to promote high-quality instruction during a volatile year
- Design a teacher equity data monitoring system to ensure all students have access to high-quality teachers

School Board Support and Transformation

The Agency requests additional resources to support existing school boards and new school boards through the transition process to ensure that the new, professional boards have the training that they need to reduce disruption to teaching and learning throughout the education transformation, and to engage in strategic planning through

the use of data to establish policies that meet state and federal requirements, while driving towards equity, quality and sustainability.

FY26 Focus

- Train existing boards on their redefined roles and responsibilities during the transition period and provide resources and tools to support close out activities and oversight of educational quality during a disruptive time
- Develop curriculum and training for new boards in alignment with the district quality standards with consideration to the unique challenges of each new district