
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: House Committee on Education
Respectfully Submitted by: Zoie Saunders, M.Ed., Secretary
Subject: Education Transformation Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request
Date: March 21, 2025

Education Transformation Budget Request

The Agency of Education is providing additional information and detail related to the Governor's request for \$4 million in the FY26 budget to support education transformation. This Agency has informed and refined its request in alignment with the priorities and needs identified by the AOE's policy sprint teams and articulates how Agency teams, consultants and new positions will be leveraged to support key areas of need throughout the transition period and create additional capacity within the Agency to support district and school quality.

Request for AOE positions to support education transformation and district quality

The Agency proposes to create an Education Transformation Transition Support Team that would ultimately become a permanent source of targeted support for district operations and school quality. Led by a Transition Team leader, these positions would be aligned and supported by the work of consultants funded through the Governor's FY26 budget request described below.

Position 1: Business Operations Support Specialist

This position will be tasked with supporting district offices to integrate disparate accounting, HR and other back office functions. They will work in the field to convene district teams, evaluate current systems and practices and, with the support of the consultant(s) described below, develop new district budgeting, hiring and back office functions. The Business Operations Support Specialist will surface resource and training needs to other Agency teams, and will play a key role in coordinating state and district priorities should the state move towards statewide data systems. This position will be required have experience in district business offices and, in future state, will serve as the Agency's point of contact to support districts to achieve proficiency in District Quality Standards related to Business Operations.

Position 2: Data Integration Support Specialist



This position will work closely with the Business Operations Support Specialist to support district offices to integrate disparate data systems, and, if needed, will serve as the key state-district liaison should the state require single statewide data systems. Similar to their counterpart in Business Operations, this position will convene inter-district teams to evaluate existing systems and develop plans to integrate. This position will be required to have experience in district data management and state and federal reporting requirements.

Position 3: Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist

This position will coordinate work between districts and with Agency teams to support the integration and alignment of curriculum, proficiency-based grading practices, local assessment, graduation requirements, educator evaluation, high-quality instructional materials, master scheduling, and other high leverage education quality standards. This position will coordinate closely with Agency teams to ensure alignment with state accountability and quality frameworks and with the consultant(s) in the Academic Transformation section below. They will also surface resource and training needs to other Agency teams and ensure their timely delivery to their partners in the field.

Position 5: Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist

This position will work closely with the Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist to support inter-district alignment focused on best practices in teaching and learning to ensure that educators and students experience minimal disruption during the transition period. They will coordinate with Agency teams to identify areas of need related to professional development, evidence-based practices and use of continuous improvement plans to drive student success and support teacher retention. They will work with building and district leaders to build MTSS systems, with a special focus on improving delivery of special education services.

Position 4: School Facilities Field Support Specialist

This position will convene inter-district teams to evaluate facilities across the new, proposed districts. Using facilities condition data, enrollment trends, feeding and transportation patterns, and other local considerations, the School Facilities Field Support Specialist will support districts in master planning of their school portfolio under the new proposed districts. This position will coordinate with the School Facilities Program Manager and other Agency staff to ensure that districts are proficient in District Quality Standards in the future state.

Request for funding to provide direct support and build Agency capacity through transition period

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.

Financial Transformation and Budgeting Support

This resource(s) will work directly with the Business Operations Support Coordinator and Data Integration Support Specialist to support districts in aligning their accounting systems and budgeting practices for the future state, while offering timely support to districts who may need accelerated transition support due to systemic and operational challenges. The goal of this request is to ensure that existing districts can maintain their operations and avoid disruption, while providing targeted, on the ground support to integrate disparate systems and budgeting approaches through FY27 and into FY28.

The Agency requests additional resources to provide critical support through the proposed transition period from FY26-FY28. 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 FY27 and FY28 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 and precise staffing
- 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

This resource(s) will directly support the work of the Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist and Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist and other AOE teams towards two critical goals:

1. Ensure that districts have timely, on the ground, support as they align disparate curricula and instructional materials, proficiency-based grading approaches, graduation requirements, approaches to teaching and other activities to ensure that during the transition period teaching and learning is not disrupted and will result in stronger, more cohesive districts in future state.
2. Build alignment within the Agency of Education between quality standards, accountability frameworks, evidence-based approaches to learning and teaching, and systems of support for districts with the goal of expanding Agency capacity to drive continuous improvement and improve student outcomes across the state.

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 and other measures of student success. 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. Our education system has 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
- Complete an inventory of district curricula, proficiency-based grading approaches, and other elements of accountability, assessment, learning and teaching to support Agency and district staff in building alignment across existing districts.

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 (will continue into FY27 and FY28)

Education Transformation Transition Support Team

Through the AOE's policy sprint teams, conversations with partners in the field and review of feedback received through legislative committees, the AOE has identified key areas of state support that will be needed to successfully transition Vermont's education system to new governance and funding structures, while maintaining and even driving improvements in school quality and district operations. The Agency's internal strategic planning process is intended to align with these needs, while also resulting in a more resilient, responsive and stable Agency. During the transition period, ensuring that all Agency staff are prepared to provide timely and coordinated support will be a high priority for Agency leadership. In addition, the Agency will build out a District Transition Support Team, comprised of skilled and knowledgeable staff in key areas that have been identified through the policy sprint teams as being of particular importance to ensuring a successful restructuring of the education system. This transition team will then become a permanent source of support for districts and schools to achieve proficiency in the District and Education Quality Standards.

Full Time Members of District Transformation Support Team

- District Transformation Support Team Leader
- Business Operations Support Specialist
- Data Integration Support Specialist
- Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist
- Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist
- School Facilities Field Support Specialist

Other Agency Staff

- Child Nutrition Team: support integration of food services and other child nutrition programs
- Early Childhood Education Team: support implementation of changes to PreK funding and delivery
- Career and Technical Education Team: support integration and alignment of CTE centers into new governance and funding structure
- Academic Advancement Team (including Special Education Team): led by Chief Academic Officer, coordinate with Learning and Teaching Integration Specialist and Curriculum and Education Quality Standards Integration Specialist to support district alignment of curriculum, grading, assessments, education technology, professional development, etc with state accountability framework and quality standards through robust and timely professional development, tools and resources and on the ground technical assistance.
- Operations Team: led by Chief of Operations, coordinate with Data Integration Support Specialist, School Facilities Field Support Specialist, and Business Operations Support Specialist to provide modeling/data analysis, tools and resource, and timely on the ground technical assistance to support the integration of district operations and planning around school operations and consolidation to meet District and Education Quality Standards. Includes members of Finance, DMAD, Communications and Operations teams.
- Interagency Support Team: staff from ACCD housing and community development programs; staff from VDOL; staff from DMH and VDH; staff from ANR/DEC; staff from VAAFM; staff from ADS to support planning, training, community development, safe and healthy schools, and other needs that arise to ensure that education transformation is supported holistically and in ways that strengthen communities.

Additional Considerations and Support

In addition to many of the operational and educational needs that have been addressed through our request for resources above, the policy sprint teams identified a need for

significant legal support for contracts and collective bargaining. The sprint team also signaled that resources would be needed to facilitate community conversations, understanding and engagement throughout the transformation process. The Agency recommends that the resources for these needs could be managed through Education Transformation grants for each of the proposed new districts (managed through a consortium agreement of the existing districts or similar construct) beginning in summer FY27. The Agency does not provide legal guidance to districts, but additional funding could go towards districts hiring legal consultants with expertise in collective bargaining, contracts and communications and engagement.

The AOE and sprint teams have identified a period of time when the old, smaller and more numerous district offices and new, larger and fewer district offices will need to overlap (the FY27 school year). Consideration should be given for these additional operating costs and potential inclusion in the Education Transformation grants.

As the state contemplates movement towards statewide finance, student information and/or other data systems, consideration should be given to costs associated with maintaining two systems (legacy and new) for a period of time. To the extent possible, the cost of the new system should not be included in district budgets and should be held at the state level.