



**To: House Education Committee  
Senate Education Committee**  
**From: Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA)**  
**Re: 2025 Legislative Priorities**  
**Date: January 10, 2025**

**Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA):**

The *Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators* has been active in educational leadership across Vermont for over 44 years. Our organization supports Special Education Administrators, and collaborates with state organizations and the Agency of Education. We stay abreast of legislative issues at both the state and federal levels. Our goal is to provide leadership, support, collegiality and mentoring to all those who teach and lead in education and special education in Vermont. We advocate for high-quality education and support for all children in Vermont.

**The Current State of Special Education:**

This is arguably one of the most important times in our profession. The Vermont Agency of Education data for SY 22-23 reflects that 18% of Vermont public school students were eligible for special education services (note: this doesn't account for the increasing numbers of students we are serving through early childhood). The number of students qualifying for special education services continues to increase each year. Mental health needs in students have risen dramatically leading to more special education referrals.

**VCSEA Priorities for the 2025 Legislative Session:**

1. Mental Health and Wellbeing
2. Attracting, Preparing and Retaining High Quality Special Education Staff
3. Education Funding

**Priority 1: Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Vermont's schools are facing a critical mental health crisis among students.

- Reports of child well-being concerns to DCF continue to rise with data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey showing a significant increase in student mental health struggles.
  - According to data released by Vermont 211 in conjunction with the Annie E Casey foundation, "in Vermont between 2016 and 2020, the number of 3-17 year

olds experiencing depression or anxiety increased by 40%, from 13.7% to 19.2%”.

- The Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey results from 2023 indicate that mental health metrics plunged during the COVID-19 pandemic for middle and high school students in Vermont. Students have yet to rebound from this.
  - A quarter of students reported engaging in acts of self-harm over the past year.
  - One in seven students reported that they had made a suicide plan.
  - 80% of the students surveyed report looking at social media throughout the day.
- Schools do not have the qualified, trained staff (social workers, psychologists, behavior specialists) to handle the growing student caseloads.
- Our designated mental health agencies struggle to staff Coordinated Service Plan (Act 264) meetings, leading to delays in interagency services, and a feeling of "admiring the problem" rather than solving them.
- The scarcity of mental health professionals combined with the long wait times for therapy are leading to an over-reliance on special education services to address students' behavioral needs.

**These challenges highlight the pressing need for:**

- **Funding for community-based mental health agencies to reduce reliance on school districts.**
- **Ensure sufficient funding and capacity for public day treatment programs, as mandated by Act 168, to serve students requiring specialized support beyond what local schools can provide.**

### **Priority 2: Attracting, Preparing and Retaining High Quality Special Education Staff:**

Vermont's public schools face a severe workforce shortage in the recruitment, preparation, and retention of high-quality special educators, related service providers, behavior interventionists, and paraeducators. These shortages leave many school vacancies unfilled, forcing districts to reallocate staff to cover essential services, which disrupts IEP implementation and increases strain on the system. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported 70 percent of the most frequently cited teaching vacancies were special education teacher positions.

- High numbers of special education teachers are working under provisional licenses, lacking the deep expertise necessary to support students with disabilities. Many are still in the process of completing their education, which impacts their ability to effectively teach and manage special education classrooms.
- Many new general educators are not adequately prepared to work with students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom, contributing to gaps in inclusion and support for these students.
- Licensed, veteran staff are shouldering significant additional responsibilities, including mentoring provisional teachers and managing excessive paperwork. This increases stress, leading to burnout and potential teacher turnover.
- A sufficient number of trained educators is required to ensure compliance with Act 173 and effectively implement the MTSS framework, particularly at Tier 2 and Tier 3.

However, staffing shortages are making full implementation more challenging. As a result, there is a tendency to refer students to special education prematurely, before adequate interventions within the MTSS framework have been provided.

- The lack of affordable housing in Vermont is a significant barrier to attracting qualified teachers to the state, especially in rural areas where housing availability is limited.

**These challenges highlight the pressing need for:**

- **Loan forgiveness for teachers through both federal and state funds; increase scholarships for both undergraduate and graduate school students pursuing a degree in special education, create state funds for retention bonuses; increase recruitment that includes funding for teachers relocating to Vermont; and, increase incentives for veteran special educators taking on mentoring and who are working beyond their retirement years.**
- **Develop and maintain alternative pathways for “respecialization” and teachers adding a specialized or special education endorsement to their current teaching license; increase support and ease towards re-licensure and reinstating expired licenses; increase options of license reciprocity between states; and, increase meaningful options for teacher development programs for educators working on provisional licenses.**
- **Require inclusive education training in all teacher preparation; develop and prioritize state-wide training programs for general educators that focuses on implementing universal design for learning (UDL), and working effectively with students with disabilities (including those with behavioral challenges); provide financial incentives for schools that offer additional training opportunities for general educators to gain expertise in special education knowledge and inclusive practices; invest in MTSS implementation by allocating funds specific for personnel and resources; create a state-wide accountability mechanism for ensuring all schools implement effective tiered systems of support, in accordance with Act 173.**

### **Priority 3: Education Funding**

Funding education in Vermont has never been more complex. Taxpayers have asked for relief related to increasing property taxes. Increased needs in our schools stem from the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing systemic and social challenges. Special education continues to be a set of services and support relied upon by educators and education systems to address significant learning loss, mental health challenges, and intense and severe disability impact on educational access.

The cost of these expectations continues to climb as prevalence increases. Declining student enrollment, geographic isolation, access to independent school choice, small community schools, and high expectations and standards for educational delivery in Vermont also contribute to the overarching picture. Collectively, the cost of educating our children to the standard to which we have become accustomed has outpaced the funds available to

Vermonters through the property tax structure we use to fund our schools and VCSEA supports the efforts state-wide to consider new approaches to education funding.

VCSEA supports essential actions to stabilize the funding challenges Vermont continues to experience. Solutions must consider the ever-changing needs of students with special attention to ensuring mental health supports are in place and students with high service and support needs can access their education fully. We support funding mental health needs through community-based services. We also support high need costs being funded at the state level instead of relying on local costs. The need to create a new funding structure that allows for high-quality education without draconian cuts to spending is essential. Part of the solution is to recognize the need to hold expectations on our community partners to play the roles to which they have been tasked, including developmental services and community mental health support.

**These challenges highlight the pressing need for:**

- **Ensure that any improvements to the funding system in Vermont do not create a divisive situation between special education and general education, given the legal requirements of spending within the special education delivery model.**
- **Develop a clear funding system for students with high support needs in Vermont schools at the state level. Ensure that community services are required to cover developmental service needs that are specific to home and community success without expecting this cost to be transferred to school-based funds.**
- **Recognize and plan for the level of need through state resources to ensure therapeutic schools and alternative opportunities are available for students whose needs cannot be met within a public school building and structure. Work on this design at the state level rather than relying on individual districts to create solutions to the growing need.**
- **Create an expectation for mental health care, including individual and family therapy, social work services, addiction support and treatment, and case management, to be available to all Vermont children and adults who need that support through community and insurance services. Reduce the reliance on education funds to provide these services.**
- **The Agency of Education should develop a plan to reduce reliance on paraeducators by promoting inclusive practices. This plan should focus on increasing access to high-quality instruction through universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and other models that support student independence as required by Act 173.**

## **Conclusion**

**VCSEA urges legislative action to address mental health needs, staffing shortages, and sustainable education funding.** By supporting these priorities, Vermont can ensure equitable, high-quality education for all students, particularly those with disabilities, while fostering collaboration between schools and community partners.