

To: House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs
From: Hailley Hem, Equity and Anti-Racism Committee Chair of Vermont State Youth Council,
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Hello House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs,

My name is Hailley Hem and I am the Chair of the Vermont State Youth Council's Equity and Anti-Racism Committee. I live in Williston and am 17 years old.

The Equity and Anti-Racism Committee believes that all Vermont youth deserve to experience belonging and to have equitable access to opportunities. Education, accountability, and intentional implementation of policy on equity ensures we are preparing young Vermonters to be engaged global citizens. We recognize that many Vermonters (especially those with multiple marginalized identities) encounter systemic, cultural and interpersonal barriers to accessing these rights. Our goal with these accommodations is to level the playing field for all young people in Vermont.

Our **first recommendation** was influenced by the DEI Report presented by the Executive director of Racial Equity for the State of Vermont on January 15th, 2024. The recommendations for policy in this report cover a variety of topics, but the ones we felt were most applicable were, of course, those related to youth and education. We wanted to reiterate a few of the recommendations that may have slipped through the cracks since last year, as we feel they are crucial to the success of youth in Vermont. The following three recommendations can be found on page 19 of the document (page 21 of the PDF) under appendix A:

A. Require Secretary of Education to work with the Ethnic and Social Equity Standards in Schools Advisory Working Group to develop and maintain a model curriculum on teaching against hate speech and hateful imagery/symbols, enabling students to recognize discrimination, and to provide teaching materials, technical assistance, and coordination to school districts and superintendents to implement.

[As a committee, we recommend that schools be required to instate a curriculum that teaches these topics as part of a required class.]

B. Task the Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools Advisory Working Group with developing a model curriculum on hate speech/hateful imagery and a model policy on racial equity.

C. Require school boards to adopt a policy on racial equity at least as stringent as the model policy to be developed by the Secretary of Education.

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Additionally, the Vermont State Youth Council recommends that the General Assembly adopt a statewide equity plan as recommended in the 2024 report of the Executive Director of Racial Equity to the General Assembly. Details can be found on pages 13 and 14 of the report as well as Appendix B.

Background/Reasoning:

We hope that by reiterating these recommendations outlined in the report, we emphasize the importance of consistent policy and efforts to address inequality across the state.

Many districts already have policies on racial equity, so this wouldn't be a huge burden, money or time-wise.

Our hope is that by standardizing these policies, we lay the groundwork for more inclusive educational climates around the state.

These changes can also improve students' education, since hate speech can cause isolation and depression among students.

Our **second set of recommendations** came about after our committee reflected on the inconsistencies in policy in schools around the state regarding disciplinary action.

We feel it is important for a learning environment that students feel safe and comfortable reporting without worry of backlash from peers.

We therefore recommend:

Requiring schools to define the appropriate response for any incident of any level that occurs due to bias or prejudice, using both disciplinary and restorative actions.

These consequences should be suggested by individuals trained in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, including lessons, presentations, workshops, Restorative Justice practices, and dialogues related to the topic of discrimination, in a strong effort to change the patterns of their actions, not just punish them, without requiring the victim to speak with their discriminator.

In addition, we recommend that the General Assembly pass legislation to require schools to provide and maintain a feeling of comfort and obligation for students when reporting discrimination they experience and witness. We also recommend that legislation require schools to provide an alternative way of reporting incidents other than verbally reporting to a teacher. (Some examples are a box where students can write their reports and drop them in the box, a Google Form to ensure that others can't tamper with their reports once they've been submitted in the box, or an email to a designated administrator or staff member.) The administrator must reach out to students within 24 hours of receiving the report in order to ensure immediate action is taken against the harm. Also, require the administration to reach out to the student who caused harm within 24 hours of receiving the report, while making an effort not to show that a student who was experiencing, or was there during the incident, reported it, to maintain anonymity.

Background/Reasoning:

This is because students are going to be way more likely to report incidents if they feel they won't be reprimanded by their peers.

Extensive research has shown that students who are suspended once are extremely likely to be suspended again and are more likely to fall behind in academics or drop out of school (AIR). Additionally, students with learning differences and students of color are much more likely to be suspended.

In Vermont, “Children receiving special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) make up 15% of the student population, but account for 36% of suspensions. Given this, we feel it is important to implement policies that work to resolve conflicts through interpersonal communication, through alternative ways of discipline other than suspension, as suspensions can have significant negative consequences on students’ quality of education. We make these recommendations to improve a student’s educational experience overall.

The Equity and Anti-Racism Committee’s **final recommendation** is related to state implemented testing for English Learners in Vermont public schools. Vermont uses the WIDA Access for ELLs test which assesses a student’s proficiency in English. There are 5 domains: Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing and in those domains a student must receive a score of 5 to be considered proficient and to test out. We heard concerns from students that the current system for assessing knowledge of English was not very holistic as students were taking advanced classes and succeeding while still being required to take these tests.

Therefore, in regards to English Language Learners, the Vermont State Youth Council recommends that if a student scores 4 in all language domains on the Access for ELL’s testing for 3 years consecutively without placing out, their proficiency shall be reevaluated in a more holistic manner.

In this case we task the ELL Teacher at a given school to assess the students’ proficiency by surveying the students’ teachers, counselors, and advisors as well as the student themselves to determine if they can be deemed proficient.

This survey would evaluate a students’ ability to complete assignments, participate in class, and ability to succeed in challenging courses in regards to their knowledge of English.

This process can also be initiated upon request after 2 years of a student scoring 4 in all language domains on the Access for ELLs testing.

Background/Reasoning:

This is necessary for equal educational opportunity.

Vermont statute says every person shall have equal opportunity and if a student is being weighed down by these tests when they are succeeding in their classes, it is counterproductive and infringes upon their ability to learn equally to their peers.

This process is often carried out in school settings, and we urge the legislature to make this a statewide procedure.

Thank you.