
Opening Remarks

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education
Respectfully Submitted by: Zoie Saunders, M.Ed., Secretary
Subject: Confirmation Hearing
Date: March 11, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to Vermont students and educators as the Secretary of Education. I see my confirmation as a chance to celebrate the Agency of Education's work over the past year and reflect on lessons learned. I am also excited to share my vision for strengthening the Agency's capacity to support educators, ensure equitable education opportunities for students, and, most importantly, elevate statewide learning outcomes.

The focus of my last confirmation was about sharing how my prior experience, leadership roles, and training prepared me to be Vermont's next Secretary. Being a new leader to the state, I understood that Vermonters' skepticism about my fit for the job was rooted in a desire to protect that which is most sacred to a thriving democracy – our public education system. In fact, I was drawn to Vermont precisely *because* of the state's enduring commitment to public education. I continue to be inspired and humbled by the opportunity to serve a state that cares so deeply about educating the next generation. A year later, I am excited to sit before you to describe the work I have led as Secretary of Education.

As Secretary, I am responsible for leading an Agency that provides leadership, oversight and support of our state education system to ensure a substantially equal education for all Vermont students. I assumed the role at a particularly challenging time for education in Vermont when state leaders were reckoning with problems of declining enrollment, unsustainable property tax hikes, declining academic performance, and a lack of trust in the Agency I was about to take over. It takes a certain type of leader to take on those challenges, which I have done time and time again throughout my career. At the Agency, the joke is that I run on "purpose, optimism...and coffee." This is true, particularly the coffee part to push through late nights and early mornings. But in all seriousness, I want to describe who I am as a leader and why this job motivates me to get up every morning to do the hard work for Vermont students.

As a leader, I value transparency, integrity, collaboration, accuracy, vision and above all else drive to get the right work done - not just to check a box but to make a difference for students. My approach to the job has been to study the issues, ask a lot of questions

and then more hard questions (as my team will attest) until we come to a solution that addresses root causes and builds a sustainable and effective solution that we can measure. I continually challenge assumptions of what is possible and push my team to do whatever is needed now to deliver on our promise as an Agency to students. I feel strongly that we don't have time to waste, because students are depending on us.

I believe that transparency and integrity are critical to effective leadership. Over the past year, I have done what I said I was going to do.

- I have listened;
- I have learned;
- I have led on the things that matter most to Vermonters;
- I have taken accountability for issues;
- I have implemented improvements to address long-standing challenges;
- I have strengthened the Agency's capacity to support the field;
- I have remained steadfast in my commitment for continuous improvement; and
- Despite all the noise and distractions, I have been resolute in my focus on showing up every day for Vermont's students and educators.

Early in my tenure, I diagnosed the needs and established a clear framework to move the Agency forward. I have led the Agency around 4 key areas that have been long-standing areas of concern:

1. Improve the Agency's support to the field,
2. Improve data quality,
3. Address compliance issues, and
4. Build a positive culture.

Agency Support to the Field

Listen and Learn

Improving the Agency's ability to support the field required me to first design and implement a comprehensive engagement strategy. I developed the Listen and Learn Tour to involve all AOE staff in the planning and to reflect on our learning throughout the process. The Listen and Learn Tour was organized in three phases. The first phase focused on data analysis and early planning with superintendents. The second phase engaged education leaders in regional planning. This phase involved over 250 education leaders, including superintendents, curriculum directors, business managers, principals, special education directors and other central office leaders. The third phase involved public engagement, teacher focus groups, and student focus groups. Agency

staff traveled all across the state and engaged with over 1,000 Vermonters. This process was critical for the Agency to identify our priorities to better support the field. We identified the need to provide more support to promote literacy outcomes, expand college and career readiness, support the mental health needs of students, and expand the accuracy and accessibility of data.

Launched Read Vermont

One of our first initiatives was to launch Read Vermont. Read Vermont is a comprehensive initiative dedicated to improving literacy outcomes for all students. Building upon [Act 139 of 2024](#), Read Vermont aims to ensure every child can read by third grade while also supporting striving adolescent readers, preparing Vermont students for college or career. In the past, the Agency and the field have struggled to implement legislative initiatives with rigor and fidelity. I saw Act 139 as an opportunity to strengthen our support and the ways that we measure success. The Agency of Education (AOE) is committed to empowering educators and caregivers as they equip each student with the tools they need to become lifelong readers. I made sure that we developed this initiative with input from educators and the Literacy Advisory Council. Beyond providing workshops, this initiative devotes resources on the ground to support job-embedded coaching. This is a new model for the Agency to pilot how we can extend our reach and support in the field.

Stabilized Struggling School Districts

The Agency has devoted a significant amount of time and resources to stabilize struggling school districts. On my first day on the job, I became aware of a supervisory union that was struggling to deliver day-to-day operations given significant central office vacancies and issues with payroll and contract management that impacted staffing and student learning. I immediately spoke with the newly appointed interim Superintendent and committed that the AOE would be there to support his team. His first response, was “Does the Agency do that?” And, I said “Yes, now we do.” I convened a cross-functional team and within a week we were on the ground to meet with staff, visit schools, and understand how we could help. The work resulted in productive coordination with the school board, leadership and staff on the ground to address the issues. Through action planning, oversight, and support we helped stabilize the district. I later learned that other districts were in a similarly challenging situation. I have worked with my leadership team to regularly review district needs and be more proactive in reaching out to offer support before a crisis situation emerges.

Increased Special Education Training, Monitoring, and Support

The Agency has increased its training for special education directors to promote greater understanding of the federal compliance issues we are accountable to and share best practices across the state. We have also increased monitoring visits and are providing more training to other AOE teams to promote greater coordination for students receiving special education services.

Increased Support for Budgeting

Through the Listen and Learn Tour, we heard a call to provide more budgeting support. We addressed this in multiple ways. We responded by providing more guidance and targeted training support on staffing and strategic budgeting. We also recognized that there was great confusion about Vermont's complex budgeting process. We produced a report to explain in plain language how Vermont's funding system works and compares to other states. This report received positive feedback for its simplicity in explaining a very complex process.

School Safety

The Agency has continued to focus on school safety. This past year, we hosted the Governor's School Safety Conference and recently contracted to provide additional training and support to conduct behavior threat assessments.

Revised Timeline for Teacher Licensing System

We have recognized the need to update our teacher licensing system. However, I insisted that this process be done correctly, by engaging early adopters to test out the bugs before we roll out the system. While originally scheduled for a January implementation, I delayed the timeline to ensure proper testing and allow sufficient time for training.

Continuous Improvement

Annually, the Agency must identify schools requiring more targeted support as defined in our state ESSA plan. This year, we added additional steps to promote early engagement with schools to review their data and initiate planning.

These are just a few examples of how we have increased our support to the field. Every week, I work with my leadership team to identify how we can better coordinate and align our efforts to maximize our impact. With each piece of work, the Agency is building its capacity, its rigor and its ability to support the field in a challenging moment.

Improve Data Quality

From the beginning, I said I would be data-driven in leading the Agency and providing targeted support and recommendations. Quickly, I realized how challenging that was going to be in practice, because of the significant data infrastructure challenges and coding inconsistencies across districts. That makes our progress even more inspiring, and we will continue to improve the timeliness, accuracy and useability of our data.

Release and Re-Release of State Education Profile Report

In August, the Agency published the State Education Profile Report. It was our first attempt to provide a data overview of academic and non-academic indicators. We learned that there were data errors and committed to a thorough, time-intensive data validation process with the field. This resulted in better quality data and allowed for expanded analysis that we included in the re-release of the State Education Profile Report. We also provided additional reports for SU/SD to support further planning. I want to pause to acknowledge how hard it can be to admit errors as a government agency upon which accuracy is of paramount importance. Personally, it was hard. This was one of the first projects that I launched, and it was designed to guide our entire Listen and Learn Tour. It also brought a lot of scrutiny to a team that was under-resourced and felt undervalued. I used this as a teaching moment. Before releasing the updated report, I brought staff together and made it explicit that we had to rerelease the report because we got some parts wrong AND, more importantly, I shared how proud I was that we worked hard to fix the issues.

Open Source Data Sets and Recipe Cards

I learned a lot through that process. I learned that we have to be more disciplined with data collection, validation, and ensuring accountability statewide to data reports. Out of that process, we instituted a new practice of sharing open source data sets and what we call recipe cards to be fully transparent about what went into the analysis. The State Profile and other recent reports have provided critical insight into our education system that has become an important tool for Agency staff, legislators, and stakeholders as we grapple with challenging conversations that must be grounded in data. I am excited about the prospect of adding additional data and analysis to enrich our understanding of our education system and drive continuous improvement.

Revamped LTWADM Data Validation

We also revamped the LTWADM process. Establishing LTWADM is a critical step in school budgeting. In prior years, it was a very iterative process that could result in 12 or more runs before landing on the final LTWADM. This past year was a difficult budgeting year. I heard from superintendents, business managers, and board members who were

concerned about the timing and accuracy of the data. So, I changed the process midstream instead of waiting until next year to make a process improvement. With tremendous support from my Deputy Secretary and a “can do” attitude from our team, we instituted new validation procedures that resulted in fewer iterations and LTWADM that districts were confident in. We are confident that we can further streamline the process for next year.

Earlier Release of State Assessment Results

During the Listen and Learn Tour, we heard a request for the state assessment results to be released earlier so they could be more relevant for planning. Through diligence and perseverance, our team delivered the preliminary results in August and is in the process of further adjusting the timeline to publish final results on an accelerated timeline.

FY25 Expanded Data Collection

Overall, we have added new data collections to support budget comparisons and planning related to class size.

Qualitative Data

The Listen and Learn Tour resulted in a rich set of qualitative data that has informed much of our strategic planning and policy development. We heard from over 1000 Vermonters from across the state about how they define student success, what the conditions are to support student opportunities and outcomes and how we can prioritize competing needs in the face of limited resources. The Listen and Learn report is over 120 pages and is supplemented by SU/SD-level and regional reports. In addition, Agency staff are in conversation with partners in the field and other stakeholders about how we can leverage other data and measures to support a Whole Child understanding.

Improving data access, analytics and reporting will continue to be a focus for me as we finalize the Agency’s strategic plan and evaluate our impact.

Address Compliance Issues

There are key areas where the Agency has been out of compliance, I am committed to not only making sure we come into compliance but also addressing the root cause of these issues to ensure we are improving the system. In August, the Agency underwent our federal monitoring visit. Preparing for the visit involved extensive analysis of current programs and supports. I am proud of how transparent the team was in evaluating our

strengths and weaknesses. US ED confirmed many of the same issues we identified along with a few others that we are working to address.

ESSA State Plan Amendments

As a result of the monitoring visit, we have made several amendments to our ESSA state plan. Notable changes include adjusting our methodology to ensure that all schools, including small schools, are included in the state's accountability system. The methodology was also revised to ensure that performance improvement was included as a criterion for exiting "additional targeted support and improvement" status. Other updates include

- Special Education Needs Assistance
- Backlog of independent school approvals:
- Federal monitoring improvement areas – graduation rate, teacher equity, accountability, etc.

Build Culture

You can't drive this type of change in a high-stakes environment without building a great culture. I reviewed the annual staff survey, and it was clear that the results have been consistently low, which undoubtedly created issues with culture and motivation.

The Agency is full of public servants who care deeply about their work and want to do their jobs well. My role is helping to create an agency to support their success. I am really proud of my team and their ongoing commitment to making sure that we are supporting the field.

From day one, I made a commitment to staff that I would be a partner in their work and that I would do my best to keep them engaged and informed. I stressed the importance of being data driven, collaborative, and results oriented. I also challenged them to think big and do more because the state needs their expertise. I also tried to create a safe culture, where we could ask questions, make mistakes and learn from them to do our work better.

Empowerment Culture

With my team, I often talk about an empowerment culture. To me, that means creating a culture where staff feel comfortable raising their hand to ask a question, voice concern, or share a different perspective. Agency staff have gotten to the level of state leadership because they are experts, and I want to hear from them. Our Agency also benefits from close relationships with our partners in the field and I want to continue to grow that

partnership. I rely on my team to alert me to issues, offer solutions and work collaboratively to make improvements that support schools. I know that when staff feel valued and heard, they are more engaged, creative, and effective in their work

- Regular staff convenings and communications: A key priority for me in facilitating a culture shift is communication. From day one, I have made sure to support cross-agency communication, ensuring that staff at all levels have access to the information they need to do their jobs effectively. I've implemented regular all-staff meetings to provide updates, celebrate successes, and address concerns directly. I also encourage open lines of communication between leadership and staff to ensure that staff understand not only what we are doing, but why, and how their work connects to the broader mission.
- Collaboration/breaking down silos: One of the challenges of State government, or any large organization is ensuring that teams work together rather than in isolation. I have worked to break down silos by encouraging cross-team collaboration and fostering an environment where different divisions and departments share knowledge and resources. By bringing people together to tackle complex issues, we leverage the full expertise of the Agency, leading to stronger solutions and more cohesive support for the field.
- Steady hand through times of uncertainty: Things feel increasingly uncertain right now, but I aim to lead with purpose whether we are responding to policy shifts, budget constraints, or unexpected crises. I always want to acknowledge challenges while staying focused on solutions. My goal is to create an environment where staff feel equipped to adapt and where they know their work is making a difference, even in times of change.

Vision for the Future of the Agency

For too long, the Agency has operated without a strategic plan. At a staff meeting during my first few months, I asked staff who were involved in the creation of the last strategic plan to raise their hands. Almost no hands went up. This lack of engagement and overarching strategy has made it difficult to align our efforts, measure progress, and ensure that we are effectively supporting the field. My goal is that every staff member can raise their hand and say they were involved in the creation of our strategic plan and that everyone feels that their work is driving towards the same goals.

A year ago, I was asked what my vision was for education in Vermont. At the time, I felt that it was important to first listen and learn more about Vermont—to engage with educators, families, and communities to understand their needs before setting a course. Over the past year, my focus has been on gathering input, identifying priorities, and

working with Agency staff to create a strategic plan that reflects the realities of our schools and the aspirations of our state.

One of my key goals has been to develop a plan that is not just another document on a shelf, but a living framework that drives meaningful change. A strong strategic plan will provide clarity on our role, help us prioritize resources, and ensure that we are measuring our impact.

We must be both ambitious and pragmatic, balancing long-term vision with the urgency of the challenges in front of us. With that in mind, I am focused on:

- Finalizing a strategic plan
- Clarity on our role and impact
- Results-oriented, highly accountable team that gets the work done
- Tight on the things that matter most
 - More professional development
 - Aligned/coordinated training
 - Research and innovation
 - PLPs that drive student centered learning and promote college and career exploration
 - Ensure access to high quality instructional materials
 - Facilitate planning across the state to bubble up best practices and work collaboratively to problem solve for all Vermont students.

This work requires us to be deeply connected with the vision for the future of public education in our state. Regardless of what policies are implemented at the end of this session, here is what I am clear on:

- Vermonters care about holistic measures of student success
- Vermonters are committed to personalizing instruction and helping students explore their interests after high school, be that college, technical school, starting their own business, or joining the military.
- Equity is a deeply held value, which I share, and will continue to focus on to ensure that students from across Vermont benefit from world class educational opportunities, regardless of where they live, and that they get the support they need to thrive in school and after graduation. A true measure of success will be when students are consistently achieving at high levels, regardless of zip code or other characteristics.
- In a future state, every child has access to early childhood education, the allied arts, enrichment programs, afterschool and tutoring support, and wrap around supports through coordination with community partners.

- This future state will build upon Vermont's commitments and values, and I look forward to being part of it.

As with everything I have done, I am focused on the work. We are very clear on our path forward. With a clear vision, aligned priorities, and a focus on results, we can better serve Vermont's educators, students, and communities.

Additional Resources

- [Read Vermont webpage](#)
- [Read Vermont Launch Webinar](#)
- [Overview of Explicit, Systematic, and Evidenced-based Literacy Practices;](#)
- [Screening Guidance Overview](#)
- [Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer \(EBT\)](#)
- [Flowchart of Process for Independent School Approval](#)
- [Approved Health Standards; Approved Physical Education Standards](#)
- [School Budget Training Resources](#)
- [Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee Report](#)
- [SPED State of the State;](#)
- [State Education Profile Report Re-Release November 22, 2024;](#) [State Education Profile Report - August 2024](#)
- [Vermont's Education Funding System: Explained and Compared to other States](#)
- [Listen and Learn Tour Video](#)
- [Listen and Learn Summary Report](#)
- [Overview Policy Brief](#)
- [Funding Formula Proposal](#)
- [Governance Proposal](#)
- [Harassment, Hazing and Bullying Prevention Advisory Council](#)
- [Presidential Scholars Recognition Video](#)

- [AOE Vacancy Rate by Fiscal Year](#)

Secretary Saunders' 2024-25 School Visits

1. White River Valley High School
2. South Royalton Elementary School
3. Colchester High School
4. Twin Valley Middle/High School
5. St. Johnsbury Elementary School
6. Manchester Middle School
7. Currier Memorial
8. Dothan Brook School
9. Hartford Memorial Middle School
10. Windham Southwest SU
11. Stafford Career Center
12. Lamoille South SU
13. Mountain School
14. North Country Union High School
15. Central Vermont Career Center
16. Integrated Arts Academy
17. Hunt Middle School
18. Bellows Falls High School
19. Woodstock Middle/High School
20. Cabot School
21. Crossett Brook
22. Barre Town
23. Hazen Union High School
24. Hardwick Elementary
25. Newport Town School
26. River Valley Tech Center
27. Essex High School
28. Randolph Technical Center
29. Randolph Union High School
30. Little Ones University
31. St Albans Town Education Ctr
32. Patricia A Hannaford Career Center
33. Burr and Burton Academy
34. River Bend Technical Center
35. Main Street Middle School

- 36. Union Elementary School
- 37. Peoples Academy
- 38. Mountain Village School
- 39. North Country SU

Listen and Learn Public Engagement Schedule

DATE	LOCATION
October 22, 2024	Woodstock Union High/Middle School 100 Amsden Way Woodstock, Vermont
October 23, 2024	Mount Anthony Union High School 301 Park Street Bennington, VT
October 23, 2024	Stowe High School 413 Barrows Road Stowe, VT
October 28, 2024	Montpelier High School 5 High School Drive Montpelier, VT
October 28, 2024	West Rutland School 713 Main Street West Rutland, VT
October 29, 2024	Lyndon Town School 2591 Lily Pond Road Lyndonville, VT
October 30, 2024	Enosburg Falls High School 65 Dickenson Ave Enosburg Falls, Vermont
November 6, 2024	Virtual Meeting (ASL interpreter available)
December 3, 2024	King Street Center 87 King St Burlington, Vermont
December 3, 2024	Brattleboro Union High School 131 Fairground Rd Brattleboro, Vermont
December 4, 2024	Champlain Valley Union High School 369 C V U Rd Hinesburg, Vermont
December 10, 2024	Virtual Meeting