



LEGISLATIVE REPORT

SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN

Act 73 of 2025

December 19, 2025

Issued by the Vermont Agency of Education

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Background

Pursuant to [Section 30 of Act 73](#), the Agency of Education, in consultation with the State Advisory Panel on Special Education (SEAP) must develop a three-year strategic plan for the delivery of special education services in Vermont.

The strategic plan must:

- Include unambiguous measurable outcomes and a timeline for implementation.
- Be informed by the analysis and finding of the [Current State of Special Education Delivery Report](#) (Act 73, Section 29).
- Be designed to ensure successful implementation of Act 173 of 2018
- Provide the supports and processes that need to be in place for the transition to a weighted funding model for special education to succeed, including a suggested transition timeline, with benchmarks for success.
- Include contingency recommendations for special education funding in the event federal special education funding under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400–1482, is no longer available or transitions to a system that requires more planning and management on the part of the State to ensure funds are distributed equitably.

Process

Strategic Planning Context

Over the past 18 months, the Agency of Education has facilitated a comprehensive strategic planning process grounded in statewide engagement and deep data analysis. Beginning with the Listen and Learn Tour and followed by extensive quantitative and qualitative review, the evidence pointed unmistakably to two central system needs: addressing persistent gaps in outcomes for students on IEPs and strengthening special education processes and oversight in light of longstanding federal compliance issues. Further planning underscored that meaningful improvements in special education are contingent upon broader efforts to strengthen general instruction and expand support for all learners. Improving special education is a system-wide endeavor, meaning that needed improvements in special education cannot occur as intended without statewide improvements to general education.

Throughout this period, the Agency has engaged in intensive internal planning to reconnect with its mission, assess organizational strengths and opportunities, and strengthen alignment across teams. At the same time, the 2025 legislative session introduced new priorities that further informed and sharpened the Agency's focus—reinforcing the need to strengthen equity, quality, and accountability across the education system and with particular emphasis on special education.

This collaborative process is guiding the development of a statewide vision for public education and new strategic plan organized around five pillars:

- Academic excellence
- College and career readiness
- Safe and healthy schools
- Operational effectiveness
- Special education and differentiated support for all learners

One key result of this work has been a full reorganization of the Agency of Education. The reorganization elevated special education and strengthened academic leadership through the addition of a Chief Academic Officer, Deputy Chief of Academics, and elevated the State Director of Special Education position within the Academics Area to be a member of the Secretary's Extended Cabinet. These structural changes ensure a focus on special education in executive decision making and create tighter alignment between special education, curriculum and instruction, prekindergarten, and college and career readiness.

Building on this foundation, each of the new divisions is developing its own division plan, aligning day-to-day work with the Agency's strategic priorities and long-term goals. The Agency is intentionally fostering a bottom-up, top-down, meet-in-the-middle approach that honors the expertise of staff, incorporates best practices from the field, and maintains a focus on improving performance.

The Agency published its strategic planning framework at the statewide planning retreat in November of 2025, which was attended by 300 educators, organizational partners, legislators and AOE staff. The plan embeds a focus on special education throughout all five strategic pillars. Key performance indicators have been established for each pillar, and measurable targets will be established through the work of Steering Committees over the next 6 months. The plan intentionally integrates special education goals and strategies across the entire system. This approach ensures that Vermont develops *one statewide plan*—avoiding the siloed structures and fragmented initiatives that hindered coherence in prior reform efforts. In alignment with this framework, each division within the Agency is developing its own division-level plan that connects directly to the Agency-wide goals and identifies the coordination required across teams to ensure unified implementation.

Planning Emphasis on Special Education

As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Agency maintains an advisory panel, known as the Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP), for the purpose of advising the Agency's special education staff regarding the education of eligible children with disabilities. With the majority of members being either individuals with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities, the SEAP lifts up the perspective of students and families most impacted by the statewide decisions related to special education delivery. The SEAP recently completed an unmet needs analysis that has

informed the Agency's continuous improvement efforts in coordination with a deeper data review; it served as an input into the strategic planning process.

To guide the development of the Agency's strategic plan, the Special Education Steering Committee was formed (formerly referred to as the Policy Sprint Team) with representation from the SEAP and other education leaders across Vermont. The larger SEAP continues to provide input and direction on the Steering Committee's progress on the strategic plan as a regular agenda item.

The Special Education Steering Committee was launched ahead of the other strategic planning committees, which will begin meeting in the early part of 2026, to support the Act 73 deliverables related to special education. The committee's focus began with the needs assessment and identification of priority focus areas reflected in the Act 73 Special Education Delivery Report, published in September 2025. The findings from that report informed the committee's discussions and shaped the feedback provided by both the Steering Committee and the Special Education Advisory Panel in developing the special education division plan.

The Steering Committee met six times over a two-month period and the SEAP met twice over that same time frame to provide input on the Special Education Report, which served as the environmental scan that is the basis for the strategic plan.

Following the submission of the Act 73 Special Education Delivery Report, the SEAP and Steering Committee refocused its work to complete the next legislative deliverable – the three-year special education strategic plan – and to advance the goals and initiatives aligned with the Agency's overarching strategic pillars. From the outset, the Agency acknowledged the timeline constraints and clarified that the legislative deliverable in December would take the form of a division plan framework, couched within the broader Agency strategic plan.

The Agency collaborated on the special education division plan with the SEAP and Steering Committee on the following dates with the corresponding committees:

- October 7: SEAP - Full Panel
- October 16: Steering Committee
- October 21: SEAP - Executive Committee
- October 29: Steering Committee
- November 4: SEAP - Full Panel
- November 13: Steering Committee
- November 18: SEAP - Executive Committee
- November 29: Steering Committee
- December 2: SEAP - Full Panel

The working document reviewed by these groups over the past two months was intentionally designed as a special education division-level plan. However, because this work occurred concurrently with the development of the Agency-wide strategic plan,

additional iteration and refinement continue to be required to ensure alignment across the full planning framework. Input gathered at the November 4th statewide strategic planning retreat further confirmed that the division plan must be appropriately scoped and fully nested within the broader Agency-wide strategic plan, which is being refined with input from educators across Vermont.

As part of this work, the Agency has proactively identified the need for additional expertise and support to fully respond to legislative criteria for the strategic plan and to address the major needs elevated by educators, stakeholders, and families. To that end, the Agency is in final contract negotiation to secure a special education finance expert to produce a subsequent report outlining the support and processes necessary for a potential transition to a weighted funding model. Additionally, the Agency has identified the “Best Practices in Teaching & Learning Implementation Plan” as an accelerated initiative. To advance the work, the AOE is finalizing a contract with a special education expert to design the monitoring tools, training systems, and accompanying guidance required to implement best practices in special education, universal classroom design, and multi-tiered systems of support. Beyond guidance documents and tools, the AOE has identified the need for statewide training - moving from diagnosing the challenges to strengthening statewide capacity to improve outcomes both by establishing the necessary conditions for improvement at the school and district level and by supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices in the classroom. These expert partnerships combined with the ongoing counsel of the field will bolster the Agency’s capacity and inform the next phase of strategic planning and implementation.

As a result, the report herein identifies the larger Agency-wide planning context and clarifies the central focus of the special education division plan. The division plan plays a critical role in operationalizing this work effectively within the statewide strategic framework.

Given the urgency of the findings, the Agency has already launched accelerated initiatives to strengthen monitoring, training, and statewide implementation of best practices in special education. These efforts are intentionally situated within the broader work to improve Tier 1 instruction for all learners and strengthen Vermont’s multi-tiered system of supports.

The Agency-Wide Strategic Plan Framework

This section provides an overview of the major components of the Agency’s strategic planning process with an emphasis on the connection to special education delivery and supporting students on IEPs. The strategic plan framework is comprised of an environmental scan, vision, mission, values, key performance indicators, and strategies. The plan will be refined over the next several months, with input from Steering Committees, to include measurable multi-year performance targets and strategies. Agency-wide strategies will be supported and operationalized by division plans, which

AOE staff will be held accountable to through their major job responsibilities and annual goals, holding the Agency responsible to the state's education priorities.

Environmental Scan

The Agency's strategic plan framework is grounded in a data-driven, research-based environmental scan of Vermont's education system. Special education was a major focus area of the Agency's data analysis, comparative review of state education systems, and research on effective teaching and learning practices.

Listen & Learn Tour

This work began with the *Listen and Learn Tour* in 2024, which engaged educators, students, school leaders, and Agency staff across the state to understand both our strengths and our most pressing challenges. Through these conversations, it became evident that the Agency needed to realign its work to better meet the evolving needs of the field and deliver statewide priorities for equity, quality, and accountability.

Qualitative feedback from the Listen and Learn Tour underscored the need for support for special education students and educators. Educators across the state noted challenges and areas where additional support could benefit special education staff and students. Educators shared the need to support early identification of special education students to ensure students receive the related services they need as early as possible, while advocating for more consistency in identification processes across school systems. Literacy tools, including at the secondary level, were identified as an area that additional resources from the AOE are needed to support continued academic gains for special education students. Additional tools related to special education monitoring were also identified as a need. Educators highlighted the ongoing staffing shortage and the desire for additional special education staff, including teachers and paraprofessionals. Educators also stressed it is important to ensure special education students are served in the appropriate setting that is best for their learning, whether in the general education classroom, in a program setting, or a combination thereof. They also expressed concern about the availability of therapeutic settings for high-acuity students, leading to long waitlists.

Data Analysis & Comparative Research

To complement and anchor the qualitative findings, the Agency undertook an intensive data analysis process—including the *State Profile Report*, *Funding Report*, and internal system reviews. The State Profile Report identified academic performance declines in literacy and math and persistent achievement gaps for students on IEPs compared to their peers. Based on the most recently available national data from OSEP, Vermont's reading proficiency rates for students on IEPs ranks well below the national average.

The decline points to an underlying issue with quality instruction and a particular concern regarding access to services and instructional support for students on IEPs.

The Funding Report compared Vermont's finance system to other states and noted considerations on special education delivery due to Vermont's unique funding, governance, and rurality. Specifically, Vermont has fewer specialized teachers, tends to over-rely on paraeducators, and lacks scale to share services. Small class sizes in relatively small districts make it hard to provide students with essential specialized services for needs such as reading and math intervention, English language, counseling, or behavior support. Additionally, Vermont school districts typically employ more paraprofessionals per student than schools across the nation. The above average staffing of paraprofessionals, including through one-on-one services and in small group settings, may have unintended consequences, most notably limiting students' interactions with highly skilled classroom educators and resulting in less interaction with their student peers.

Findings From the Act 73 Current State of Special Education Delivery Report

With support from the Special Education Steering Committee and SEAP, the Agency produced a deeper analysis of the current state of special education delivery which was published to the General Assembly on September 26, 2025. The main findings have directly informed the Agency's emphasis on special education in its strategic plan, including the launch of accelerated initiatives.

While overall student enrollment has decreased, the number of students with IEPs has risen. The state has also experienced growth in the number of students qualifying for extraordinary expenses, indicating not only that more students are being identified, but that the intensity and complexity of their needs could be increasing. Rising extraordinary costs, particularly in the categories of tuition and transportation, reflect both the growing severity and complexity of student needs and the fact that many districts lack the in-house capacity, staffing, and specialized resources to respond effectively.

Compared to other states and national averages, Vermont serves a larger number of students in either more inclusive classrooms or separate schools, particularly in the disability categories of autism and emotional disturbance. In Vermont, 81.97% of students with IEPs (11,563 students) spend 80% or more of their day in a regular classroom, while 5.27% are in separate schools (743 students). Nationally, 67.08% of students with IEPs are in a regular classroom 80% or more of the day, and 2.36% are in separate schools. These patterns highlight gaps in service delivery that carry significant cost implications. Early data suggest that the observed model in Vermont drives both an overreliance on costly out-of-district placements and expensive adaptations within inclusive classrooms, challenges that could be at least partially mitigated through stronger classroom design and more effective instructional delivery in general education settings. Although Vermont is inclusive for many students, qualitative data indicates a continued challenge with general and special education practices that can manifest in

an overreliance on paraeducators to access general instruction and a lack of shared ownership of the educational outcomes for students with IEPs.

The delivery gaps noted above bear out through a sharp increase in extraordinary costs. Over the past six years, extraordinary costs have accounted for nearly half of the growth in total special education spending, despite representing only about 15% of overall expenditures. This pressure is not driven by an overall increase in students on IEPs but by growth in tuition and transportation costs to serve intensive cases, particularly among students with autism, emotional disturbance, and multiple disabilities. Vermont's "Excess Cost Grant" system, designed to reimburse districts for high-need cases, is being used more frequently, underscoring the systemic service delivery and funding challenges tied to supporting students with the most significant needs.

Statewide decline in performance for all learners, coupled with persistent achievement gaps for students with IEPs, suggests that best practices already codified in law need further support to be implemented with fidelity. If 82% of students with IEPs are in more inclusive classroom settings, then the gaps in those settings are also impacting student outcomes for the majority of students in Vermont, both those with and those without IEPs. At the same time, students with more significant needs are served in separate settings at a higher rate than other states, and there is a need to ensure students are placed in the least restrictive environment for their specific needs.

Evaluating the effective implementation of evidence-based instructional practices consistent with Act 173 is a primary area of future inquiry and critical to supporting the legislature's exploration of a shift to a weighted special education funding model. While sufficient for federal reporting, accountability methods for Act 173 are inadequate for evaluating the fidelity of implementation of Act 173, subsequent state rule changes, and related education reforms. Specifically, there is limited visibility into how evidence based instructional practices are being implemented; the extent to which intervention supports are consistently accessible to all students across schools and districts; and how clusters of services are being operationalized to support students with IEPs in public school settings.

An important consideration in any discussion of cost containment is compliance with federal funding requirements. At the state level, IDEA includes a Maintenance of Fiscal Support (MFS) test, which prohibits reducing state support for special education year-to-year. Failure to meet MFS can trigger dollar-for-dollar reductions in future IDEA allocations. At the local level, Maintenance of Effort (MOE) imposes a similar obligation on LEAs to sustain their special education spending. Together, MFS and MOE create a dual accountability framework that protects funding for students on IEPs and must be factored into any proposed changes to the funding formula.

The findings and identified areas of inquiry have directly informed the Agency of Education's capacity building efforts. Specifically, the Agency recently completed a reorganization, designed to model coordination across general and special education

and strengthen oversight and support to the field, including the creation of new positions and the alignment of teams.

The areas of inquiry noted in this report are driving the Agency's ongoing strategic planning process with a particular focus on implementation planning and building capacity at the state and district levels to ensure best practices are delivered with fidelity to all learners and sustained at scale.

Main Takeaways from Comprehensive Environmental Scan

These analyses, together with findings from Vermont's federal monitoring visit by the U.S. Department of Education, confirmed the need to strengthen academic leadership, clarify parameters for high-quality instruction, and establish a stronger monitoring framework to ensure consistent implementation of effective, evidence-based practices across schools and districts. Findings also underscored the importance of providing clearer definitions of roles and responsibilities at every level of the education system, ensuring the right expertise and accountability structures are in place, and building continuous improvement processes that will move the entire system forward. Specific to special education, the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has ranked Vermont as "needs assistance" determination for the past several years. Based on several compliance and result indicators, OSEP's designation signals a need to improve Vermont's special education monitoring processes, timelines for evaluations and transition planning, participation and proficiency rates for students on IEPs, as well as decreasing student dropout rates.

Vision

The strategic plan is being organized around a unified, statewide vision for public education in Vermont, which the Agency and State Board of Education are responsible for crafting per state statute. Based on input from the environmental scan and education priorities established in state law, the Agency introduced the concept of giving all students "roots and wings" as primary components of the vision statement at the November 4th statewide planning retreat. The State Board of Education played a prominent role in connecting the vision to the experience of Vermont students now and into the future. At the planning retreat, we gathered initial input from participating education leaders. Moving forward, we are developing an approach to cultivate additional voices and perspectives, including from students, over the coming months.

Components of Vision Statement

In Vermont, we envision becoming the best public education system in the country where we give every student both *roots* and *wings*.

Roots reflect our deep commitment to personalized learning grounded in community values. Focusing on roots ensures each student is known, supported, and connected to

the people, places, and traditions that make Vermont unique. By cultivating strong relationships, environmental stewardship, and a sense of belonging, we help students develop a clear sense of identity and purpose.

Wings represent the promise of new opportunities—for students and for the communities they call home. Through access to high-quality instruction, real-world learning, advanced technologies, and global connections, students develop the skills and confidence to shape their own futures. As young people thrive, they bring energy, innovation, and hope back to their communities, fueling local vitality and helping to build a stronger Vermont.

This vision calls us to transform education into a truly student-centered system—one that honors local identity while expanding opportunity, and one that prepares every learner to contribute meaningfully to the future of our state.

Roots & Wings for Students on IEPs

Common themes from planning with the SEAP and Special Education Steering Committee underscore the importance of giving students on IEPs both roots and wings. Roots are often described as ensuring that all students on IEPs feel a true sense of belonging in the general education classroom coupled with a concern that our current system is not well equipped to foster the level of inclusion espoused in Vermont. A sense of belonging is not just a fundamental Vermont value, but an evidence based one. *Beating the Odds: Learning from Grade K–8 Schools Outperforming Expectations for Students with Disabilities*, notes that, "research indicates students learn best and are most successful when they feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging at school. [Students with disabilities] feel most included when schools create an environment in which they experience essential dimensions of belonging: being present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed¹." Wings are represented in discussions related to ensuring all students on IEPs get the services they need to thrive academically and achieve success in school and life.

Mission

The Agency of Education implements state and federal laws, policies, and regulations to ensure all Vermont learners have equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities. The Agency accomplishes its mission through the provision of its leadership, support, and oversight of Vermont's public education system.

¹ [Beating the Odds: Learning from Grade K–8 Schools Outperforming Expectations for Students with Disabilities](#)

Strategic Pillars

The Agency's strategic plan is organized around 5 pillars:

1. Academic Excellence
2. College and Career Readiness
3. Safe and Healthy Schools
4. Operational Effectiveness
5. Special Education and Differentiated Support for All Students

The strategic pillars anchor the plan around central focus areas and will serve as the organizing principle for future reporting and monitoring to meaningfully advance progress across these priorities.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

KPIs have been identified within each pillar, and measurable 3-to-5-year targets will be set in consultation with the Steering Committees over the next 6 months. Interim measures will also be identified to track growth and support mid-course corrections along the continuous improvement cycle.

With a focus on equity, goal setting will identify performance targets for students from historically marginalized communities and students on IEPs. Relevance to special education has been noted for KPIs under each pillar.

Academic Excellence

These KPIs will allow the Agency to measure and support statewide progress in elevating academic excellence. The primary source of data will be summative assessment results on the Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VTCAP) and National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), though efforts will be made to include local comprehensive assessment data to emphasize growth. Additionally, the Agency has established a Technical Advisory Committee to provide guidance and support on the assessment process, which will focus on incorporating a better growth metric among other priorities. Access to a high-quality teacher is a measure that will be refined as part of Vermont's ESSA state plan amendment and federal action plan.

KPIs (3-to-5 year measurable targets to be set)

- Improve proficiency in English Language Arts
- Improve proficiency in Mathematics
- Improve proficiency in Science
- Improve access to a high-quality teacher

Connection to Special Education Delivery

Baseline data indicate persistent achievement gaps in these academic areas between students on IEPs and their peers. Improving the quality of first instruction and increasing students on IEPs' access to that instruction will result in improved proficiencies and reduced achievement gap. As such it will be important to track how students on IEPs gain access to high-quality teachers trained in universal design and special education best practices. A sub-goal will be set to track the state's decreased reliance on paraprofessionals.

College and Career Readiness

These KPIs will allow the Agency to measure and support statewide progress in promoting college and career readiness, ensuring that students graduate prepared for success beyond high school. The data sources vary within this pillar with middle school acceleration representing a new performance area requiring further definition in the ESSA state plan and state law and persistent rates requiring expanded partnerships to track.

KPIs (3-to-5-year measurable targets to be set)

- Improve graduation rates
- Improve middle school acceleration
- Improve completion of industry certifications
- Improve college persistent rates

Connection to Special Education Delivery

Students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate than their peers. Creating accessible graduation requirements, including flexible pathways, will be considered in relation to improving graduation rate and reducing the drop-out rates for students with an IEP.

Safe and Healthy Schools

These KPIs will allow the Agency to measure and support statewide progress in promoting safe and healthy schools, focusing on the non-academic conditions to promote teaching and learning. Data sources vary though are largely collected and reported through annual monitoring. However, safety incidents will likely necessitate a measure of fidelity of reporting. Facility planning represents a new metric that will be collected as a baseline in 2025 through the District Quality Standards self-assessment.

KPIs (3-to-5-year measurable targets to be set)

- Reduce chronic absenteeism
- Reduce drop-out rates
- Reduce school safety incidents

- Improve facilities planning

Connection to Special Education Delivery

Students on IEPs report higher rates of chronic absenteeism and drop-out rates than their peers. Additional data inputs will be progress monitored to evaluate the relationship between inclusive environments and graduation rates for students with IEPs, including tracking suspensions and expulsions, and restraint and seclusions rates. Additionally, facility planning must also consider ADA compliance.

Operational Effectiveness

These KPIs will allow the Agency to measure and support statewide progress in improving operational effectiveness. Data will measure internal operational effectiveness of the Agency to deliver its mission along with the operational effectiveness of school districts and the public education system at large. Goal areas related to improved customer service and Agency professional development will require new data collection measures.

KPIs (3-to-5-year measurable targets to be set)

- Accelerate assessment reporting
- Improve grant utilization in alignment with statewide priorities
- Increase professional development opportunities for Agency staff and leadership
- Achieve compliance in all key areas of federal regulation
- Improve customer service

Connection to Special Education Delivery

For the past several years, Vermont has received a Needs Assistance determination from the Office of Special Education Programs. Achieving compliance will require improving general supervision and special education monitoring protocols, increasing participation and proficiency rates, and decreasing drop-out rates.

Special Education and Differentiated Support for All Students

These KPIs will allow the Agency to measure and support statewide progress in improving special education delivery and differentiated support for all learners. Data sources related to “Act 173” will be developed in consultation with special education experts and the field through the accelerated launch of that initiative.

KPIs (3-to-5-year measurable targets to be set)

- Close the achievement gap
- Meet or exceed federal compliance
- Quality Act 173 measure

Connection to Special Education Delivery

Students on IEPs are general education students first. Act 173 requires improvement to the quality of general instruction and intervention for all learners, ensuring that students on IEPs can access general education and that all learners benefit from personalized, differentiated instruction that supports remediation as needed and acceleration when ready. These KPIs are intentionally designed to evaluate special education delivery within the context of the quality of general instruction for all learners, ensuring that students on IEPs can access general education and that all learners benefit from personalized instruction that supports remediation as needed and acceleration when ready.

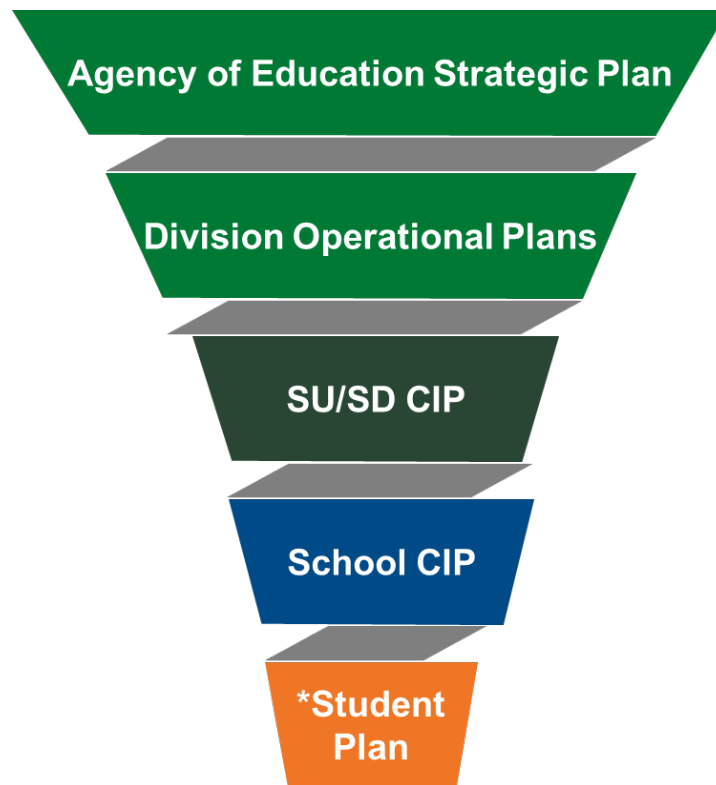
Implementation Plan

The implementation process is essential to ensuring that the strategic plan becomes a dynamic roadmap—one that actively guides the Agency’s work rather than serving as a static document on a shelf. The plan must inform daily practice, support the General Assembly in monitoring progress, and enable timely mid-course corrections as needed.

With the vision components, mission, and key performance indicators established, the next phase requires two critical steps:

1. Engaging a broad range of stakeholders to refine the statewide vision for the future of public education.
2. Collaborating with the steering committees to set measurable multi-year targets for each KPI, clarify core strategies, and outline a phased implementation timeline.

As this strategic direction crystalizes, each division will revise its plans and focus areas to ensure coordinated delivery of the strategies across divisions, teams, and state partners. The strategic plan will also be cascaded to the field, ensuring alignment between statewide priorities and district and school continuous improvement plans (CIP) so that the entire system is moving in a coherent direction.



*The Student Plan is conceptualized within the context of a reimagined Personalized Learning Plan for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade and will incorporate components necessary to satisfy a student's IEP, EST, 504 plan. The Agency does not need real time access to the data at all levels but rather ensures the system of alignment is in place.

Steering committees will begin meeting in January, including the reconvened special education steering committee with expanded membership.

Each strategy will be accompanied by a detailed action plan with clear milestones and accountability structures. These action plans will be actively monitored to ensure sustained progress.

To reinforce this continuous improvement cycle, the Agency will host an annual statewide planning retreat. The inaugural retreat in November 2025 established the foundation of the strategic plan. Future convenings will focus on measuring progress toward goals, assessing impact, and refining strategies based on evidence and feedback from the field—strengthening what works and addressing what needs adjustment

Accelerated Strategies

As the multi-year strategic plan takes shape, there remains a clear sense of urgency to address priority needs now. To that end, the Agency has launched a set of accelerated initiatives that are already well underway. These efforts focus on improving literacy and math outcomes, raising graduation expectations, strengthening students' sense of

belonging, enhancing statewide data dashboards, and expanding training and monitoring of best practices related to special education. Across each of these strategies, there is a deliberate focus on improving outcomes for students on IEPs, ensuring they are fully supported as we advance systemwide improvement.

Pillars	Accelerated Initiatives
Academic Excellence	Read Vermont, Math Pilot
College and Career Readiness	Statewide Graduation Requirements
Safe and Healthy Schools	Everyday Counts Campaign, Hazing Harassment & Bullying Prevention
Operational Effectiveness	Data Reporting and Enhanced Dashboards
Special Education & Differentiated Supports for all Learners	Best Practices in Teaching & Learning Implementation Plan

Feedback on the Special Education Division Strategic Plan

The AOE's Academics area's mission is to cultivate an inclusive Vermont educational system from early education to adulthood that embraces the unique strengths of all learners and their caregivers, and fosters academic excellence, lifelong learning, well-being, and success. We will do so through four commitments to:

- Support districts, schools, and education programs in implementing rigorous, high-quality instruction and curricula that are responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of each and every learner, including students with disabilities and those who are historically marginalized.
- Facilitate a seamless continuum of learning from cradle to career, ensuring that each and every student has access to the learning resources and supports necessary to thrive in their post-secondary lives.
- Provide actionable, data-driven insights to districts, schools, education programs and community members to drive continuous improvement in student outcomes and program effectiveness through accountability and support.
- Champion equitable practices and policies that dismantle barriers to learning and foster a culture of high expectations, well-being, and belonging; where each and every student feels safe, supported, and challenged to reach their full potential, and where all families feel included, valued, and empowered to support their learners.

This mission is in support of the AOE's vision of Vermont becoming the best public education system in the country where we give every student both roots and wings and aligns to the five strategic pillars of Academic Excellence, College and Career

Readiness, Safe and Healthy Schools, Operational Effectiveness, and Special Education & Differentiated Supports for all Learners. Across the AOE, each division is engaging in a strategic planning process at the division level, and within the Academics area, they are doing so with this mission in mind.

The Special Education Division is currently engaged in the strategic planning process by incorporating the main findings of the Act 73 Special Education Delivery Report, the SEAP feedback on identified unmet needs and the feedback from the Steering Committee to advance the goals and initiatives aligned with the Agency's overarching strategic pillars.

The Agency collaborated on the special education division plan with the SEAP and Steering Committee on the following dates with the corresponding committees:

- October 7: SEAP - Full Panel
- October 16: Steering Committee
- October 21: SEAP - Executive Committee
- October 29: Steering Committee
- November 4: SEAP - Full Panel
- November 13: Steering Committee
- November 18: SEAP - Executive Committee
- November 29: Steering Committee
- December 2: SEAP - Full Panel

During sessions with the Steering Committee the Agency heard feedback on themes related to accessibility and belonging of students on IEPs in the general education curriculum, a need to build a robust continuum of supports, reducing the reliance on paraeducators, and improving the quality of special education delivery. Improving general education instruction and accessibility is a broad theme that will be positioned within the agency-wide strategic plan, as will portions of the continuum of supports. Other components of building a robust continuum of supports, and the improvement of special education delivery will be reflected in the Special Education Division's Plan. The Steering Committee continues to emphasize the need for a mindset shift toward shared responsibility across general educators and special educators for the success of students with IEPs.

The SEAP provided feedback on areas of need related to improving the quality and consistency of special education delivery, improving the accountability structures within special education, and fostering family collaboration to ensure the education system is accessible. Again, the quality and consistency of special education practices, and accountability structures within special education sit within the Special Education Division's Plan. Family collaboration will be reflected across both the agency-wide and Special Education Division's Plan.

Special Education Division Strategic Plan Development

The Special Education Division Strategic Plan will be divided into four main components: reestablishing a strong cyclical monitoring based on evidence-based service delivery models; addressing the continuum of supports available to students on IEPs; improving the accessibility special education processes; and an Agency integrated focus on improving quality throughout the education system.

The data presented within the Act 73 Special Education Delivery Report, the SEAP feedback on identified unmet needs and the feedback from the Steering Committee indicate that there are specific special education compliance or best practice targets that should be implemented to meet the needs of Vermont's students. The AOE is finalizing a contract with a special education expert to design the monitoring tools, training systems, and accompanying guidance required to implement best practices in special education, universal classroom design, and multi-tiered systems of support. These expert partnerships combined with the ongoing counsel of the field will formalize the identified areas into goals and objectives during the next phase of strategic planning and implementation.

Re-establish Strong Cyclical Monitoring

First, the Special Education Division will need to re-establish strong cyclical monitoring based on evidence-based service delivery models to;

- Improve evaluation timelines and transition plans
- Improve significant disproportionality and significant discrepancy between students with and without disabilities.
- Improve the effective applications of Extended School Year services
- Improve outcomes for Multi-Lingual Learner who also have an IEP
- Increase the educational benefit of IEPs for students

Address Gap in Service Delivery

Secondly, the Special Education Division will need to work closely with school districts to address the "Missing Middle" in service delivery: Vermont has a high rate of full inclusion (81.97% of students in regular class >80% of the day) but a disproportionately high rate of students in separate schools (5.27%) compared to the national average (2.36%). This suggests a lack of "middle-tier" intensive supports within public schools, forcing districts to utilize costly external placements when full inclusion is insufficient.

Portions of this work will be rolled up into the full Agency strategic plan as it requires both the improved implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and creating regional or district-level specialized programs that allow students to remain in their communities.

It is important to note that students placed in therapeutic settings often present with the most significant academic, behavioral, and mental health needs in our education system. The intensity of services required to support these students appropriately and safely is inherently resource-intensive. Efforts to address the “missing middle” do not discount the need for therapeutic placements and recognize that for some students that will be the most inclusive setting for their learning.

Improve Accessibility & Caregiver Involvement

Thirdly, the Special Education Division, through partnerships with the SEAP and Vermont’s Parent Training and Information Center, Vermont Family Network will work to improve the accessibility of special education processes and the materials available to support families.

Integrated Focus on Improving Quality through Intra-Agency Coordination

Finally, the Special Education Division’s plan will emphasize the support necessary to ensure that the ongoing implementation of the Agency’s strategic plan results in an educational system that is accessible for students on IEPs.

Under the College and Career and Academic Excellence KPIs, the Agency seeks to improve the quality of first instruction through the use of high-quality instructional materials and to implement evidence-based instructional practices. This will include best practices in instruction and differentiation, as well as principles of Universal Design for Learning.

Systemically, these improvements will be paired with updated graduation requirements and personalized learning. The Special Education Division will coordinate with the Curriculum & Instruction Division to shift focus from compliance to quality and add perspective on required elements to ensure that the standards and requirements are accessible for students with IEPs.

The KPI’s under Safe and Healthy Schools require a supportive, inclusive, and accessible environment at baseline, as well as updated guidance and technical assistance around suspensions and expulsions and restraint and seclusions, particularly as those policies relate to students with IEPs. The Special Education Division will be engaged with the Safe and Healthy Schools Division to ensure that guidance reflects best practices in special education.

The KPIs under Special Education and Differentiated Support for All Students are largely tied to the ongoing implementation of the entire strategic plan. Act 173 requires improvement to the quality of general instruction and intervention for all learners, ensuring that students with IEPs can access general education and that all learners benefit from personalized, differentiated instruction that supports remediation as needed and acceleration when ready. As outlined above, this will require an emphasis on high-quality first instruction, but also on the system of interventions available to those

students who need additional support. The Special Education Division will coordinate with the Curriculum & Instruction Division to ensure that the system is designed with students with IEPs in mind. Certain best practices will need to be adopted systemically, such as clearly defined intervention structures, inclusive scheduling, and universally-designed first instruction.

Systems Level Considerations

Scale and funding continue to present systemic challenges as the state of Vermont strives to build a more equitable education system—one in which every district and school can address teacher workforce shortages, strengthen service delivery, reduce costs, and provide more coordinated supports.

Next Steps

The next phase of this work will focus on refining the Agency-wide strategic plan as we formally launch the four remaining steering committees and reset and expand the Special Education Steering Committee. During this phase, Agency-wide planning will play a central role in shaping the next iteration of the Special Education Division plan, ensuring that its priorities, strategies, and timelines are aligned to the broader statewide vision. Working closely with special education experts and strengthening intra-agency coordination will enable us to produce a more coherent, evidence-based roadmap that supports the improvements outlined in the emerging strategic