



# **VERMONT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION ANNUAL REPORT**

**Report to the Governor and the Vermont General Assembly**

**December 18, 2025**

**Submitted by the State Board of Education Chair, Jennifer Deck Samuelson**

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## Introduction

Among the responsibilities established in 16 V.S.A. § 164, the Vermont State Board of Education (the Board) is required to prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly “on the progress the Board has made on the development of education policy for the State.” 16 V.S.A. § 164(21). Although this statutory language is outdated—Act 66 (2021) removed the Board’s authority to establish and advance statewide education policy—the Board believes it is important to summarize its work over the past year and highlight key issues anticipated for the year ahead.

## Work Performed In 2025

As an organization composed primarily of volunteers, the Board benefits from the diverse expertise and shared commitment of its members to education in Vermont. In 2025, Board members attended a combined total of approximately four dozen meetings, including monthly and special meetings of the full Board, Board committee meetings, and meetings of the Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont and the State Aid for School Construction Advisory Board in which Board members served in their official capacities. Most members sit on multiple committees and thus devoted substantial preparation time to ensure that the meetings were productive and efficient.

In addition, several Board members attended the planning retreat that was hosted by the Agency of Education (the Agency) on November 4<sup>th</sup> and shared their perspectives. The Board understands that the Agency anticipates publishing the major themes from the planning retreat in the near future, and the Board looks forward to its continued collaboration with the Agency to establish a statewide vision for education.

As an organization, the Board’s major areas of focus during the past year are summarized below.

### 1. Independent School Reapprovals

The Board’s Rule Series 2200 Approvals Committee works with the Agency to review applications for reapproval submitted by independent schools. There are many steps involved in this process, which helps ensure that each independent school that is granted reapproval satisfies statutory standards as well as the Board’s rules. At the Board’s April meeting, the Agency provided the Board with a detailed update on the recent work performed by staff in support of the independent school reapproval process, including:

- Approval and publication of the new Standard Application on January 21, 2025, which includes an enhanced PDF version containing embedded technical assistance.

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- Distribution of the Standard Application and instructions to independent schools with renewal dates from 2020–2025, with an April 1, 2025, submission deadline.
  - Ongoing individualized technical assistance meetings with school leadership to support completion of the new application.
  - Development of standard operating procedures for the Agency’s Special Education Liaison who is involved in site visits to schools that are eligible to receive public tuition as well as therapeutic schools.
  - Desk audits for thirteen schools reviewed prior to early 2024 to assure compliance with updates to the 2200 Rules that became effective on July 1, 2024.
  - Scheduling site visits for remaining schools in the backlog once applications are deemed complete.

With the passage of Act 73 (2025) in June, the number of approved independent schools that remain eligible to receive public tuition funds has substantially decreased. The new criteria do not apply to therapeutic schools, out-of-state public schools, or independent schools that meet Education Quality Standards (which remain eligible to receive the full amount of tuition charged pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 824). The Agency solicited and reviewed data from all currently approved independent schools to determine which schools remain eligible to receive public tuition funds under Act 73, and the Board reviewed the Agency’s determinations at its August meeting.

### **Independent Schools Eligible to Receive Public Tuition Pursuant to Act 73**

1. Thaddeus Stevens School \*NEASC
2. Maple Street School \*NEASC
3. Killington Mountain School \*NEASC
4. Burke Mountain Academy \*NEASC
5. Thetford Academy \*NEASC
6. Stratton Mountain School \*NEASC
7. Expeditionary School of Black River
8. Southshire Community School
9. Riverside School
10. Burr & Burton Academy \*NEASC
11. St. Johnsbury Academy \*NEASC
12. Mountain School at Winhall \*NEASC
13. Long Trail School \*NEASC
14. East Burke School
15. Sharon Academy \*NEASC
16. Lyndon Institute \*NEASC
17. Village School of North Bennington \*AISNE
18. Okemo Mountain School

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Given the substantial reduction in the number of approved independent schools that remain eligible to receive public tuition, the Agency and the Board have adjusted the order in which schools are reviewed for reapproval. At the Board's request, the Agency will prioritize tuition-eligible schools while continuing to process the applications of those schools whose applications were completed prior to the passage of Act 73. The Board anticipates continued collaboration with the Agency to ensure timely and thorough reapproval reviews and expects that all schools whose applications are pending will be addressed by the Board in the coming year.

### **Independent School Approvals in 2025**

The Board granted requests for reapproval to the following independent schools:

- Cornerstone School, a therapeutic independent school
- Arlington School, a therapeutic independent school
- Saxon Hill Kindergarten
- Mt. Mansfield Academy, an independent school ineligible to receive public tuition
- C.H.O.I.C.E Academy, a therapeutic independent school
- East Meadows School, a therapeutic independent school
- Maple Street School, an independent school eligible to receive public tuition
- Village School of North Bennington, an independent school eligible to receive public tuition
- Greenwood School, a therapeutic independent school
- Hilltop Montessori, an independent school ineligible to receive public tuition
- Foundations Upper Valley, an independent school ineligible to receive public tuition
- Two Roads Academy, a therapeutic independent school including a new K-5 therapeutic program in Newport
- Laraway School, a therapeutic independent school
- Pond Brook Project, an independent school ineligible to receive public tuition

### **2. Certificate of Approval for Post-Secondary Schools**

The Board also holds responsibility for approving post-secondary schools, though such applications are infrequent. Upon receipt of an application, the Secretary appoints a review team to evaluate the school and, if necessary, conduct a site visit. The team submits a written recommendation to the Secretary, who then makes a recommendation to the Board. As with requests by independent schools for reapproval, requests for approval of post-secondary schools are considered first by the Board's 2200 Approvals Committee which then brings its recommendation to the full Board for discussion and decision.

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In 2025, the National Institute of Funeral Services (NIFS) applied for a certificate of approval. Following review, the Secretary recommended approval. The Board granted NIFS a three-year approval, giving consideration to the following in its decision:

- adequacy of planning and readiness to launch,
- anticipated student enrollment,
- capacity for future expansion,
- availability of qualified part-time funeral director faculty,
- flexible program delivery,
- anticipated two-year timeline in which to obtain accreditation through the American Board of Funeral Services Education,
- tuition compared to other programs, and
- demonstrated workforce need within the profession.

NIFS is authorized to offer an Associate of Applied Science Degree in Funeral Services beginning with its first semester of enrollment in January 2026.

### **3. Statewide Graduation Requirements**

Act 73 requires the Agency to develop and recommend statewide graduation requirements to the Board by January 1, 2026. Erin Davis, Chief Academic Officer at the Agency, has led the Agency's work and has provided periodic updates to the Board on research and stakeholder engagement, the development timeline and methodology for approaching the work, cost analyses and implementation considerations, opportunities for student and stakeholder engagement, impacts on small or scale-challenged districts, specificity of credit requirements and potential flexibilities.

The Board will embark on this work in 2026 upon receipt of the Agency's recommendations. Although Act 73 requires the Board to initiate rule making by July 1, 2027, to amend its Education Quality Standards and adopt standards for statewide graduation requirements based upon the Agency's recommendations, the Board anticipates undertaking this work well before the deadline so that schools will have ample time to align their requirements to the Board's updated rules.

### **4. Special Education**

At its August meeting, the Board received feedback and a preliminary report from Katie Ballard, Chair of the Vermont Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP). Pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the SEAP advises the state on issues affecting students with disabilities ages 3–21.

Ballard presented the SEAP's observations as reflected in its 2025 draft "Unmet Needs" report. She discussed a variety of concerns with the Board, including those related to inconsistencies between law and practice, service delivery challenges, oversight and accountability gaps, implementation of Act 173, the need for system-wide capacity

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building, and strengthening processes to ensure Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

The Board learned that the Agency is developing a strategic plan to address these issues and improve IDEA compliance. The Agency has submitted a report of the current state of special education incorporating input from the SEAP and the Special Education Steering Committee, and it provided a comprehensive update on its current timeline to the Board at the Board's December meeting. The final SEAP report will be provided to the Board upon completion.

## **5. Small Schools and Sparse Schools Report**

Pursuant to Act 73, the Board created a committee, chaired by Vice-Chair Tammy Kolbe, to develop proposed standards for identifying schools that are "small by necessity" or "sparse by necessity." The Committee gathered public input and conducted comprehensive analysis before finalizing its recommendations. The Board adopted the Committee's recommendation at its December meeting and will submit it to the legislature as required.

## **6. Review and Update of State Board Rules**

Act 73 also provided an appropriation enabling the Board to conduct a comprehensive review of all administrative rules under its authority. This work includes identifying rules recommended for repeal, reassignment, or revision and preparing a complete report for the Legislature by December 1, 2026.

The Board has contracted with legal counsel to support this work and to assist with forthcoming rulemaking on minimum class size standards and statewide graduation requirements. The Board extends its deep appreciation to the General Assembly for appropriating funds that will allow this critical work to be performed.

## **Conclusion**

In the year ahead, the Board anticipates continued collaboration with the Agency and the Governor's Office as it carries out its statutory duties. Major priorities will include adopting statewide graduation requirements, updating rules to reflect new minimum class size standards, reviewing and approving independent schools under Rule Series 2200, analyzing and reporting on the status of the administrative rules under its authority, and working with policymakers to address emerging educational issues in 2026.

Respectfully Submitted:

- Jennifer Deck Samuelson (Chair), Manchester, VT
- Tammy Kolbe (Vice Chair), Plainfield, VT

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- Zoie Saunders (Secretary, Agency of Education), Montpelier, VT
  - Brian Champion, Bennington, VT
  - Mohamed Diop, Bristol, VT
  - Caleb Greenwood (voting student member), Troy, VT
  - Tom Lovett, Waterford, VT
  - Briana Marsh (non-voting student member), Newbury, VT
  - Cynthia Stuart, Concord, VT
  - Rich Werner, East Dover, VT