



## **Vermont-NEA Legislative Agenda for 2025**

**Protecting strong, effective and responsive local public schools is vital to supporting our children, communities and Vermont's middle-class.**

### **Guiding Principles of Equity and Inclusion**

*Vermont-NEA believes that all matters of public policy must be built upon and in service of creating equity for all Vermonters regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Systems of oppression exist in all areas of our social, economic and governmental structures. They have been created over time and will take intentional work to dismantle and correct. To that end, it is our intention to work in strategic solidarity with those impacted to advance public policy matters that make Vermont and our communities inclusive and empowering to all citizens.*

### **School Finance – A Plan to Protect Working and Middle Class Vermonters**

*Together with our communities, Vermont-NEA members are leading the charge in making our strong public schools even better, equipping our students with the tools they need to live happy, productive and fulfilling lives, no matter what paths they choose to pursue. In recent years and especially in the spring of 2024, while the vast majority of local school budgets passed on the first vote, it is clear that Vermonters voiced frustration with our education funding system. In short, Vermonters support their local public schools but are not happy with how we fund them. Our school funding system – already the most progressive in the country – needs to become even more so to ensure that ALL Vermont kids have a chance to thrive.*

*Currently two-thirds of Vermont residential property taxpayers pay based upon their income. We believe the principle behind that law – that a person's ability to pay should be considered – should be expanded so that all Vermonters pay for schools based on their income, and that we continue to give our children great public schools. Additionally, as we work to further address the gender- and race-wealth and income gaps in society, Vermont can be a leader in making our education funding fairer for all Vermonters by ensuring the wealthiest pay their fair share. The Vermont Tax Structure Commission recommended the state move in this direction in its 2021 report. Big change can take time and we know that working and middle class Vermonters need property tax relief now!*

- The state should provide property tax relief to 50,000 working and middle class Vermonters immediately by updating key income and property measures in our current income-sensitized property tax system. These numbers have not been adjusted for inflation both for workers' income and their home value, which means working Vermonters are shouldering more of the education fund burden than they did previously while

wealthier Vermonters are paying less. This must stop, and the simple fix would, in some cases, reduce by at least 50% the amount working people are paying in the education tax. This must be done for the 2026 fiscal year.

- The state should make the school funding system fairer by eliminating the residential homestead property tax and moving to an income tax system for all to pay their fair share of their school taxes. An income tax for all will ensure everyone, not just middle-income Vermonters, pay their fair share based upon their income.
- The state should, as a matter of law, make it the default for those who borrow to purchase or refinance a home to escrow their property taxes as part of their monthly payment.
- The state should rebalance the Education Fund to ensure that the costs of supporting our students and families aren't being borne by taxpayers in unintentional ways. Over many years, schools have picked up where other parts of government have fallen back, this includes taking over providing many critical social supports for students and families. Kids need these social supports to access their learning and schools have stepped up, but it has shifted costs from the general fund to the education fund, and thus property taxpayers.

### **Students in Crisis, School Workforce in Crisis – Supporting Kids and Educators**

*Year after year, since the pandemic shutdowns, school districts have collectively faced 1,000 vacant teaching positions and hundreds of vacancies for paraeducators, bus drivers, food services workers, custodian and maintenance workers. While the school employee shortage predates the pandemic, the last several years saw an accelerated exodus of experienced educators, and schools across the state have struggled to attract and retain educators. There also remains more than 800 teachers working on emergency and provisional licenses to help fill the critical gaps. While Vermont-NEA, local districts and the legislature have worked to stand up "Grow Your Own" teacher training programs and set up new student loan forgiveness programs, the work force crisis persists.*

*Additionally, Vermont students and families continue to need significant social and emotional supports. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are widely accepted as a serious challenge facing our state's children and their ability to learn. These issues pre-date the pandemic but have only gotten worse during the pandemic. The trauma these children experience, often at very young ages, are the result of poverty, the opioid epidemic as well as other substance use issues, and other major societal issues like homelessness, unemployment, and lack of health insurance. These traumas are also often further compounded or even the result of one's race, ethnic, gender or sexual orientation. Our schools have become the backstop for these challenges and often serve as the only safe and stable place a child may have in their life. As a result, our students (and the adults responsible for their education) have experienced nothing short of an epidemic of violent student behavioral outbursts. Not only are students (and adults) being physically injured, but student learning suffers when the adults are diverted to protecting students and entire classes are exposed to the accompanying emotional trauma.*

*The state should begin to address this by enacting policies that include:*

- Continue to increase funding and systems of care for community mental health services and other social supports, including housing and homelessness, for all Vermonters including children and families.
- Increase the number of school counselors, school social workers, and other mental health professionals in schools to help meet the critical mental health needs of students.
- Oppose any plan to increase class sizes and student to staff ratios that will cut programs for kids.
- Continue to build upon the Vermont Community Schools Act of 2021– Act 67 (2021) that created a pilot program for local school district to implement a community school approach to support students, communities, and families. While additional funding was provided in 2024, the law should be expanded to help meet the needs of all students.
- Fund a comprehensive study by the AOE on student violence in schools, including key demographic information analysis and the development of model district procedures for dealing with student and staff safety and reporting of incidences. The AOE also should be required to maintain, in real time, an ongoing database of student violence in schools.
- Address administrative bloat and redundancies where it exists in schools. Students deserve to have the teachers, paraeducators and others in the classroom and school that work directly with them daily to support their learning needs.
- Maintain Teacher Student Loan Forgiveness – In 2023 the Legislature established, through VSAC, a teacher student loan forgiveness program. The program response exceeded expectations and needs, demonstrating its value. This program should be funded again to maintain this critical support to those pursuing a career in education.

### **Unemployment Parity for School Support Staff**

*Public school support staff – paraeducators, bus drivers, food service workers, custodians, and others – provide critical support to our students. Vermont students’ ability to learn is directly affected by the support they receive from the staff who feed them, drive them, encourage them and ensure their learning environments are clean and safe. In short, our children and schools can’t function without school support staff. However, this female-dominated profession has been and continues to be the lowest paid in our public schools. They are low-wage hourly employees who do not get paid during school vacations or summer months. Many work second and third jobs to make ends meet. This not only affects their ability to meet their basic needs, but it also means that there is high turnover among school support staff because their other jobs may pay better and have lower stress levels. This then impairs student learning when these support staff employees leave their school employment and take permanent positions with their “second” employers.*

*Added to this, for decades, public school support staff have been categorically ineligible to even apply for Unemployment Insurance (UI) when they aren't employed by a school. Vermont should change this policy and make public school support staff eligible to apply for UI. This change wouldn't exempt them from any other rules related to UI eligibility determination, but also wouldn't preemptively prohibit them from applying. School support staff are critical to our public schools and, therefore, should have the opportunity to maintain some level of economic dignity when school is out to ensure they can be there when their students return.*

- The state should change its Unemployment Insurance policy and make public school support staff eligible to apply for UI.

### **Reference Based Pricing – Reining in Health Care Costs for Workers, Employers and Taxpayers**

*Vermont-NEA has been and remains a leading force in health care reform, including over 30 years advocating for a single-payer Medicare for All system. At the same time, we have fought for incremental reforms along the way including recent efforts in 2024 to pass legislation giving the Green Mountain Care Board the ability to take on Big Pharma. The reality is that affordable health care is still out of reach for many Vermonters and only getting more expensive for both workers and employers – the path is unsustainable for all. The leading cost driver for healthcare is hospital costs and, if left unchecked, will continue to hurt Vermonters and our economy. Vermont can and should learn from states like Montana and Oregon that in recent years moved to a Reference Based Pricing (RBP) model for their public sector workers' health insurance pools saving taxpayers, employers, and workers hundreds of millions of dollars annually all while keeping local hospitals open. RBP is a model that ensures hospitals are fairly compensated while workers and their employers are not overpaying for care.*

*At the request of the Legislature in December 2024 the Green Mountain Care Board released an independent analysis of potential cost saving from moving to a RBP model for both the public-school employee and state employee health insurance pools. The results are significant. The report shows that that moving to this model, just for these two groups of public sector workers, could have saved over \$400 million over the past five years. For school districts and their workers, this would have been \$48 million dollars in 2022 alone.*

- The state should work to implement a Reference Based Pricing model for public-school employees, and potentially other public and private sector health insurance pools, to ensure that all Vermonters can access the care they need at a price they can afford while providing helping taxpayers.

### **Healthy Kids, Full Bellies – Creating Strong Learning Environments and a Healthy Future**

*We know that the health and wellness of children is not only a foundational value of our society but also critical to ensuring they grow up to be healthy happy adults. We also know that hungry children can't learn. That's a simple fact that propelled Vermont's schools to ensure that all students have access to healthy, nutritious, and often local meals, regardless of their ability to pay. The pandemic ushered in a national program for universal school meals, and the Vermont legislature in 2022 passed – and the governor signed – a bill that funds universal breakfasts and funds universal school lunches to make this permanent.*

- The state must continue to fund and provide free universal school meals program for all children in Vermont.

### **Support Healthy and Safe School Buildings**

*Vermont has had a moratorium on state aid for school construction since 2007. The vast majority of Vermont public school buildings are over 50 years old and are in need of significant renovations or replacement. We also know that the school building is the learning environment for children and teaching environment for educators, and a poor learning environment does have an effect on the ability of students to access their education and for educators to teach. Furthermore, with recent state laws requiring all schools to test for toxic PCB contamination, we know that in some cases our schools may not be safe for students and educators. A recent analysis done by the state shows that the cost of fixing and updating our public school buildings will be between \$6-9 billion and the longer we wait the more expensive it will get.*

- The State must fully restart and fund the state aid for school construction program. A new school construction fund must be capitalized, perhaps by a tax on the richest 1% of Vermonters, and that fund must be maintained in an ongoing and sustainable way. Any new program should ensure that funding is distributed in equitable ways that ensures the needs of students and communities are met, their ability to pay is recognized, and incentives for newer and fewer that comprehensively supports rural communities.
- Fully fund and support the cost of PCB remediation in schools

### **Protect Students' Learning and Mental Health – Technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Educators use technology every day in school to support student learning. Schools and educators are constantly adapting with technology to ensure that it is being used in ways that help learning and doesn't distract from it. Constant exposure and access to technology, however, isn't all good. In the spring of 2023, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory about the mental health impacts of social media on young people. We also know cyber bullying is a significant issue that students experience often outside of the school setting but it affects students' in-school learning. We know that cell phones can be a significant distraction for students in the classroom. Not only does this distract the individual student, but it impacts their peers and their educators.*

*The state should work to protect students' mental health and learning by:*

- Adopting common sense standards for social media companies that protect youth by adopting laws like those recently passed by California and Maryland.
- Prohibiting the use of cell phones by students during instructional hours in schools. This could be done by state law or by requiring the Agency of Education develop a policy that creates a baseline that all Supervisory Unions/School Districts must adopt. The draft policy or law must ensure that educators are not required to carry out the burden of the enforcement of this policy, so they can focus on their students and teaching.
- Enacting policies that ensure the privacy of student and youth data from technology companies that may be used in both education and non-education settings.

## **Fairshare for Vermont – Ensuring the Wealthiest Vermonters Support all Vermonters**

*For too long Vermont's wealthiest haven't been paying their fair share. At a time of increasing needs related to building and maintaining infrastructure, funding schools where our students can thrive, supporting Vermont families, increasing access to healthcare and housing, and protecting our environment we must ensure that those few with the most are supporting the needs of the many. In short, we must increase taxes on the wealthiest Vermont residents to build a state that works for all of us. We believe that asking the wealthiest Vermont taxpayers to pay their fair share in taxes is crucial to increase the amount of revenue available for public goods and services that will make the state better for everyone, including the wealthy.*

*The Legislature should pass:*

- A new top marginal income bracket on annual income over \$500,000
- This proposal will raise approximately \$75 million each year in state tax revenue
- The proposal will only affect the wealthiest 1% of Vermont taxpayers

## **Keep Pension Promises**

*In 2010, 2014 and again in 2022, Vermont-NEA members fought for and reached historic agreements with the State protecting the fiscal security of the Vermont State Teachers' Retirement System (VSTRS), saving taxpayers billions of dollars over the course of the next several decades. After being required to pay more and work longer in 2010, the 2022 agreement requires Vermont's teachers, once again, to pay more while seeing a slightly reduced Cost of Living (COLA) benefit that they must wait an additional year to receive. There are many factors that resulted in the most recent VSTRS pension conversation, including teachers leaving the profession, but it was compounded by the fact that from 1979-2006 the state underfunded the teachers' pension system by what the Treasurer's offices estimated to be at least \$350 million. To help make up for the systematic underfunding, the 2022 pension agreement in Act 114 (2022), requires the state to not only continue to make its contributions as determined by the actuaries, but also make additional payments of up to \$15 million annually starting in Fiscal Year 2024. Additionally, what is often not known is that retired teachers only receive a cost-of-living adjustment that is equal to 50% of the CPI. Act 114 creates an incremental path for future retired teachers to receive a normal COLA benefit of 100% of CPI, once VSTRS reaches 80% funded. This sustainable path to a normal COLA benefit is funded by dedicating 25% of future state General Fund budget surpluses to this rebalancing of COLA benefits.*

*Additionally, non-licensed school employees, including paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, food service workers and others, comprise 2/3 of the Vermont Municipal Retirement System (VMERS). While they have continued to pay more and seen increased contributions in recent years, they do not have access to any meaningful health care benefits in retirement, as do teachers and state employees.*

To maintain retirement security now and in the future for the people who teach the state's children, the state should:

- Continue its recent successful practice of providing full funding of VSTRS

- Maintain the requirement to make extra payments annually up to \$15 million in FY 24 to VSTRS
  - Maintain the requirement that 25% of any future state budget surplus goes to build towards a normal COLA benefit for VSTRS participants.
  - Maintain the commitment to pre-funding the VSTRS health care benefit (Other Post-Employment Benefits or OPEB)
- The State of Vermont, in consultation of the State Treasurer's office and the VMERS Board of Directors, should conduct a comprehensive study and analysis of how to move, over time, toward allowing school support staff in VMERS to earn a meaningful health care benefit upon retirement and beginning the process of implementing such an earned benefit.
  - Refrain from statutory intrusion into the investment procedures of our public pension systems
  - Oppose any effort to bifurcate the system or introduce risky 401(k)-type schemes for new teachers. Not only will such a process weaken retirement security for new teachers, it will threaten the fiscal health of those who are already participating in the pension system.

### **Support of Public Education and Responding to the Radical Supreme Court**

*For centuries, Vermont has operated a school voucher system that entitles students in communities that don't operate a public school to attend other schools at public expense. In recent years, there have been aggressive attempts by anti-public school advocates to expand the use of public tuition dollars for ANY school, regardless of whether the school is in Vermont or whether the school discriminates against some students. In its June 2022 ruling in Carson v Makin, the ultra-conservative US Supreme Court sided with the plaintiffs deciding that public money must also be used in private religious schools., thereby ignoring the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution. With this radical ruling, Vermont's voucher spigot is now wide open, diverting public money to schools that don't abide by the same rules as public schools, namely the mandate to educate all students who come through their doors. As a result of this ruling, Vermont can no longer run its 200+ year historic tuition structure to function as it has.*

*Vermont's legislative leaders have a long history of acting promptly to address threats to deeply held core values. Indeed, when discrimination against same-sex couples threatened to deny the right to marry, Vermont legislators acted, becoming the first legislature to pass a marriage equality law. And when the threat to reproductive freedom became apparent, again because of the extremist US Supreme Court, Vermont lawmakers spearheaded Proposal 5, which now enshrines reproductive autonomy in our state Constitution.*

*As public education in Vermont faces its biggest threat in decades by a radical conservative ruling by the US Supreme Court, Vermont's legislative leaders need to act once again to protect another core value:*

- The preservation of our state’s public schools and their requirement to accept and educate ALL students.
- Public education funds must be used in a transparent and fair manner, and the legislature must act to preserve public accountability and equitable treatment for all students.

### **Help Schools Do Even Better**

*One of the most attractive attributes Vermont has to offer businesses, entrepreneurs, and young families is our public school system. Locally accountable, our public schools rank in the top 5 in the nation consistently year after year. We need to ensure our local public schools are equipped with the resources to provide Vermont’s children with a top-quality education, so that they continue to be the catalyst for shared prosperity throughout Vermont.*

- **Student Resources.** Maintaining adequate resources for schools is essential to the future of our local communities. Vermonters invest wisely and appropriately in their local public schools and do so because they understand the importance of a high-quality local school in the health and vitality of our communities and, most importantly, our children. Despite the conclusions of academic studies, students are best served when they have access to high-quality teachers, paraeducators and other professionals in our schools. We must resist simplistic “solutions” that will only result in fewer opportunities for our children.
- **School Leadership.** The State should commission research to assess why there is so much turnover among principals by, among other things, surveying the pool of potential principals, i.e., teachers, about their aspirations to become a principal, by surveying former principals about why they left, and by surveying school boards for reasons behind retaining or releasing individuals from the position. Of course, current principals also have important contributions to this research.
- **AOE capacity.** The State (every state) engages in “enforcement” and “technical assistance” to schools and other public service providers. The ranks of our AOE have been decimated over the past decade. The State should improve the capacity of AOE to do its job.

### **Make Vermont More Attractive for Working Families**

*We share the notion that Vermont can be the country’s most attractive place to live, work and raise a family. We also believe that working families will come to and stay in Vermont because of policies that can increase and share prosperity for all of the state’s communities.*

*Among the policies the state should enact are these worker-friendly proposals on which Vermont-NEA works with our partners and allies:*

- Pass Proposal 3, the Vermont Constitutional Amendment to enshrine the right for workers to collectively bargain. It was passed in the 2023-2024 biennium, with near unanimous support, and must pass again in the 2025-2026 biennium before it is presented to all voters for a vote in November 2026.



- Pursue an omnibus worker's bill of rights for businesses and non-profits taking public grants to ensure that these state money created jobs are good for working people that offers workers basic protections like fair scheduling, just cause and a livable wage.
- Pursue implementation of a Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FaMLI) allowing workers to take needed leave to care for themselves or loved ones through a state administered insurance program. If funding requires a payroll tax or other fee by both workers and employers, the costs should be shared equally by both parties.
- Enact so-called good cause for all legislation that enables employers to discharge employees, but only if they have a good faith reason related to the employer's business and not trivial, arbitrary, or capricious reasons.