

VSA's Timeline and Framework for Incremental Change in Vermont's Education System

I. Introduction

Vermont must transform education thoughtfully and incrementally, guided by a clear vision that supports all students, looks to the future, and uses resources wisely. Many are discussing change, but there is no clear plan or understanding of its impact on students. The current disorganized and politicized debate is not benefiting public education and instead promotes school vouchers and state takeover. A student-centered approach with clear, research-backed goals is needed to ensure efficiency and quality.

This policy framework aims to achieve the following goal:

Leverage attainable and research-based scale to address opportunity, equity, and affordability.

To achieve this goal, we propose the following phased approach:

II. Instructional Scale

District Scale -

1. Create a Working Group for Instructional and District Scale to guide district consolidation with a clear purpose: increasing student opportunities while realizing maximum efficiency.
 - Composition to include public education and research expertise, and small enough size to complete its charge
 - Charge shall be to determine the most efficient number of districts, and proposed district boundary lines, based on sound research, Vermont's unique landscape, and comprehensive analysis of school locations, conditions, and capacity. District size goals must be data and research-driven, not arbitrary, and enhance efficiency, equity, and educational opportunities.
 - The Working Group will quantify cost savings, identify expanded opportunities for students, and use GIS mapping and other tools to ensure sustainable, equitable outcomes.
 - CTE governance reform should be factored into the working group's charge.
2. The Working Group should consider in its recommendations school size (see below).
3. Eliminate the concept of the supervisory union so that district resources directly support equitable student opportunities and outcomes in an efficient manner.
4. The Administration and General Assembly must be responsible for a plan for Collective Bargaining Agreements and other contracts to coincide with recommendations regarding district configurations. Any consolidation is contingent upon this work and has not yet been addressed by the proposals laid out by the Administration or members of the General Assembly.

Timeline:

- June 2025: Working Group is established with clear charge and resources
- December 2025: Working Group puts forth a proposal for redistricting based on sound research and analysis
- January to May 2026: Legislature considers proposal and enacts legislation that enables the formation of newly consolidated districts
- July 2026 - June 2029: Necessary actions to move toward new district structures
- July 1, 2029: New districts in operation

School Size -

Considerations for school size should begin by defining guaranteed opportunities for students. Any consideration of school size minimums must address funding for school construction and renovation. Any proposal that ignores school size fails to significantly address the goals of equity, opportunity, and affordability.

To do this, the legislature must:

- Create a vision for future-focused high-quality educational opportunities for all learners.
- Establish a school construction aid program that prioritizes efficient scale.
 - Until the fund is appropriately resourced, we will be limited to the capacity of our existing infrastructure. To have larger schools we need to acknowledge that we do not have facilities that can currently support larger student enrollment.
- A geographic necessity standard needs to be clearly outlined in law, such that transportation times to the nearest school are clearly defined.
- Ideal school size and configuration must be used in consideration of district consolidation to realize the types of savings and increased opportunities that have been outlined in proposals to date.

Timeline:

- No later than June 2026: Establish a School Construction Aid Program; Sunset Articles of Agreements such that the system can move towards the recommendations of district and school scale.
- July 2026 - June 2029: Implement the district and school configurations.

Class Size -

Class size minimums are beneficial for both students and teachers, promoting better learning environments and supporting teacher effectiveness. Setting these minimums in statute to be included in the Education Quality Standards and school board policy would leverage existing quality enforcement mechanisms. Class sizes should also limit the number of grades included in multi-age classrooms in elementary grades.

- VSA recommends average minimums of: Kindergarten: 12 students, Grades 1-5: 15 students, and Grades 6-12: 18 students.

- Intervention services pursuant to Act 173 and multi-tiered systems of support must be excluded from class size minimums.
- Average class size should be calculated by grade band in a building as defined by the district and as measured at the school level.
- Limit no more than two grades per classroom.
- Recommend demographic studies and reports at least every 5 years.
- At this time, it is difficult to speak to policy related to staff-to-student ratios more broadly, given the inconsistency in definitions and reporting.

Timeline:

- June 2025 - Legislature establishes minimum class sizes in statute to be updated in school board policy effective July 1, 2026.
- October 2025 - May 2026 - School districts base FY27 budgeting decisions on class size minimums. The Agency of Education works with schools that are unable to meet this criteria and provides recommendations to both the district for the short term and the General Assembly for the long term.
- January 2026 - May 2026 - The Legislature uses updated criteria related to staffing levels to create policy to bring Vermont closer to the staff-to-student ratios in New England.
- July 1, 2026 - Class size minimums are in effect.

III. Tuitioning

Maintaining supervisory unions for the sole purpose of keeping the status quo pertaining to tuitioning does not promote opportunity, equity, and affordability.

Absent widespread reform and school construction that eliminates the reliance on tuitioning, VSA recommends the following steps:

1. Hold private schools receiving public dollars to the same standards as public schools.
2. Limit tuition dollars from leaving the state except for in the case of public schools within 25 miles of the Vermont border (excluding Canada).
3. Use school designation as a tool to maintain efficiencies, particularly in the domains of transportation and special education delivery.
4. Make these decisions immediately to support consolidation efforts.

We have been and will continue to be in a legal environment that expands vouchers and sends public dollars to private schools, including religious schools. We must ensure that policy decisions protect against the existing and future vulnerabilities to privatize our public education system.

IV. Statewide Systems

In order to do any work to consolidate structures well, there are some basic foundational structures that should be addressed. These include, but are not limited to:

1. A statewide school calendar by the Agency of Education, after consultation with educators and with consideration for recognition of the diverse cultures represented in Vermont, to go into effect in FY27.
2. Appropriation for and implementation of common finance, student information systems, and a structure for CBAs and other contracts.
3. Statewide graduation standards tied to a robust future-focused common vision for public education in Vermont led by the Commission on the Future of Public Education.

Timeline:

- 2025-2026: Determine the Statewide Calendar for 2027-2028 school year
- 2025-2026: Statewide SIS and Financial System Chosen in a collaborative effort between educators and the Agency of Education
- 2026-2028: Statewide SIS System Implementation
- 2026-2028: Statewide Financial System Implementation
- 2027-2028: Statewide Graduation Requirement Implementation (*Beginning with the Graduating Class of 2031*)
- 2028-2029: Negotiation of common bargaining agreements

V. Statewide Leadership

It is important that statewide structures are collaborative in nature and representative of educational expertise to accomplish any education transformation well. It is abundantly clear that the primary unilateral appointment structures of our state leadership structures, the Agency of Education and the State Board of Education, have become deeply political and representative of a narrow set of interests. The existing structures do not bode well for checks, balances, and authentic trust and collaboration. Further, moving more responsibilities away from the State Board of Education erodes these principles.

Thus, we recommend that the appointment of the State Board of Education fall within the responsibility of a more diverse appointment structure effective July 1, 2025, to provide more stability, irrespective of changes to the political landscape, and that is inclusive of public school education experience.

VI. Conclusion

This proposal did not address the funding mechanism for education in Vermont. VSA supports a foundation formula most closely resembling testimony from Dr. Tammy Kolbe, provides adequate modeling, and relies on implementation that starts from a current state and moves to a future state as described in this proposal. A plan for state-wide school construction must happen if we are going to achieve school-based economies of scale. VSA wants to express its unequivocal support of change to our education system that is grounded in opportunity, equity, and affordability. We ask legislators to be particularly diligent about inducing change that has not explicitly provided evidence and reasoning for improvement across these three pillars.

Implementation Timeline Summarized

2025

June 2025

- The Legislature establishes minimum class sizes in statute to be updated in school board policy and the Education Quality Standards, effective July 1, 2026.
- The Working Group for Instructional and District Scale is established with a clear charge and resources.

July 1, 2025

- The new appointment structure of the State Board of Education takes effect.

October 2025 - May 2026

- School districts base FY27 budgeting decisions on class size minimums.
- The Agency of Education works with schools that are unable to meet class size criteria and provides recommendations to both the district and the General Assembly.

December 2025

- The Working Group for Instructional and District Scale puts forth a proposal for redistricting based on sound research and analysis.

2026

January - May 2026

- The Legislature considers the redistricting proposal and enacts legislation enabling the formation of newly consolidated districts.
- The Legislature uses updated criteria related to staffing levels to create policy aligning Vermont with New England's staff-to-student ratios.

No Later than June 2026

- Establish a School Construction Aid Program.
- Sunset Articles of Agreement so the system can move toward the recommendations on district and school scale.

July 1, 2026

- New class size minimums go into effect.

July 2026 - June 2029

- Implement district and school configurations.
- Carry out necessary actions to transition to new district structures.

2027

July 1, 2027

- Statewide School Calendar goes into effect.
- Implementation of Statewide Graduation Requirements, beginning with the graduating class of 2031.

2028

July 1, 2028

- The statewide Student Information System (SIS) and Financial System are fully implemented.

2029

July 1, 2029

- Newly consolidated districts officially begin operation.