

Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont

Summary of Preliminary Findings

Senate Finance Committee

January 23, 2025

Outcomes

→ **Overview of the Commission**

- ◆ Duties, membership, deliverables
- ◆ Organization of work
- ◆ Guiding Principles

→ **Preliminary Findings**

- ◆ Context & complexity
- ◆ Call to action & collective responsibility
- ◆ Preliminary data findings & initial policy exploration
- ◆ Timeframe limitations

→ **Recommendations**

- ◆ Affirm the purpose of the Commission moving forward
- ◆ Continued and expanded engagement

→ **Questions**

1.

COMMISSION OVERVIEW

Act 183 of 2024

Commission Charge

The Commission shall study the provision of education in Vermont and make recommendations for a statewide vision for Vermont's public education system to ensure that all students are afforded substantially equal educational opportunities in an efficient, sustainable, and stable education system. Act 183 (2024)

Membership

- **Meagan Roy**, *Chair (Census Based Funding Advisory Group)*
- **Zoie Saunders**, *Secretary, Agency of Education*
- **Craig Bolio**, *Commissioner, Department of Taxes*
- **Jennifer Deck-Samuelson**, *State Board of Education Appointee*
- **Sen. Ann Cummings**, *Senate Appointee*
- **Rep. Peter Conlon**, *House Appointee*
- **Nicole Mace**, *Vermont School Boards Association Appointee*
- **Jay Nichols**, *Vermont Principals Association Appointee*
- **Michael Lechliter**, *Vermont Superintendents Association Appointee*
- **Jeff Fannon**, *Vermont - National Education Association Appointee*
- **Elizabeth Jennings**, *Vermont Association of School Business Officials Appointee*
- **John Castle**, *Vermont Rural Education Collaborative Appointee*
- **Oliver Olsen**, *Vermont Independent Schools Association Appointee*

Commission Deliverables

- Meet for the first time **on or before July 15, 2024**
- Prepare and submit a **formal, written work plan and communication plan** that will maximize public engagement **by September 15, 2024**
- Write a **preliminary findings and recommendations report, including short-term cost containment considerations**, for the 2025 legislative session **by December 15, 2024**
- Write a **final findings report with recommendations** for a statewide vision by **December 1, 2025**
- **Propose legislative language** to achieve a vision for VT's public education system by **December 15, 2025**
- **Cease to exist December 31, 2025**

Organization of Work

- **Education finance system:** *Recommendations geared toward an education funding system that affords substantially equal access to a quality education in accordance with State v. Brigham*
- **Education governance, resources, administration:** *The structure and needs of the AOE, composition, role, and function of the State Board, roles, functions, and decisions of local control v. state control, and integration of career and technical education.*
- **Physical size and footprint of the education system:** *The most efficient and effective number and locations of school buildings, districts, and supervisory unions; workforce retention & capacity driven by class-size data; town tuition program; role, designation, and tuitioning outside VT; use of private therapeutic schools; legal and financial impact.*

Guiding Principles

- **State Responsibility for Education in Vermont:** Vermont has a constitutional obligation to provide public education, and there is tension between state responsibility and authority, and Vermont's tradition of local decision making.
- **Equity:** The Commission is committed to decision making that centers equity for Vermont students and is committed to the following core understandings of equity:
 - ◆ Equity does not mean equal/same.
 - ◆ Solutions with an equity focus must be differentiated by need.
 - ◆ Equity must be considered both in terms of inputs (access) and outputs (outcomes).
- **Quality:** All publicly funded Vermont students must be afforded high quality educational opportunities that are equitable, inclusive, anti-racist, culturally responsive, and anti-discriminatory, as defined in Vermont State Board of Education Rules.
- **Sustainability & Affordability:** Public education in Vermont must be sustainable and affordable for Vermont taxpayers.

Subcommittees

Steering Group	Communication & Engagement (Framework)	Education Finance Subcommittee
<p><i>Zoie Saunders Craig Bolio Jennifer Deck Samuelson Sen. Ann Cummings Rep. Peter Conlon Nicole Mace (Meagan Roy)</i></p>	<p><i>John Castle Jeff Fannon Jay Nichols Oliver Olsen Meagan Roy (Consulting Firm)</i></p>	<p><i>Rep. Emilie Kornheiser (Chair; non-commission appointee) Zoie Saunders Craig Bolio Sen. Ann Cummings Nicole Mace Mike Lechlitter Elizabeth Jennings</i></p>

Communication & Engagement

→ **Information Sharing:** *Educate*

Informing and educating the public about the current Vermont education context and the complexity of the challenges we face. Information sharing includes providing accurate, valid data in a manner that is understandable to provide context, as well as providing ongoing information about the work of the Commission.

→ **Listening & Learning:** *Gather Information*

Gathering feedback from collaborators and the public in real time can help inform the Commission as it conducts its work. In particular, the Commission can leverage existing data and feedback being gathered from other organizations, groups and individuals.

→ **Engage:** *Partner & Influence*

Engagement is an ongoing, two-way process of building relationships, working collaboratively, and sharing power.

2.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Complexity of the Vermont Context

→ **Overall affordability challenges in Vermont**

Our state's education finance challenges exist in relation to other intractable affordability challenges in the state - rising costs of goods, services, labor and healthcare, a catastrophic housing shortage and enrollment decline.

→ **Cost (and tax impact) is not solely an issue of education spending**

Education finance encompasses spending (including cost drivers such as personnel, facilities, tuition, special education, mental health services) and revenue generation (how our system raises those funds) and how we utilize the education fund (what we choose to spend “education dollars” on)

→ **Delivery models significantly impact education quality and spending and are determined locally**

How a community chooses to educate its youth (including the number & size of schools and districts) significantly impacts both spending and quality.

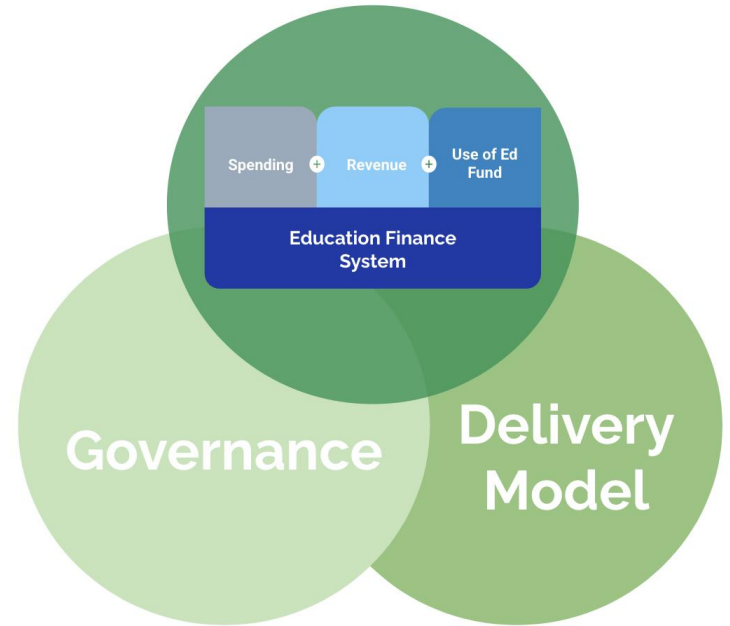
“The Commission believes it is critical for all those involved in discussions about education finance to be clear about the intersection of these policy areas.”

- Education finance
 - ◆ Spending (cost drivers like personnel, healthcare, tuition, facilities...etc), revenue generation, use of the education fund
- Delivery models
 - ◆ Class and school size, district size and infrastructure
- Governance, resources & administration
 - ◆ Who makes decisions about school size, structure, budget, etc?

*How we **choose** to spend our education dollars impacts **cost** & **quality***

Call to Action...Collective Responsibility

- ▶ Vermont has a shared responsibility for the education of our youth
- ▶ Delivering on this responsibility will require us to collaborate around broad transformational policy changes



“It is the belief of the Commission that real solutions will include changes to all three policy consideration areas, and we wish to begin this report by elevating that finding. There is no ‘silver bullet solution.’”

Preliminary Data Findings & Policy Exploration

→ **Commitment to use of clear, valid and accurate data**

The Commission has been, and will continue to be, data-driven in its focus. Examining data with a critical eye does not mean eliminating data sources outright - it means understanding the limitations of any source and taking limitations into consideration

→ **Early data themes have been consistent and point to the complexity of Vermont's education ecosystem**

We are unique in how we organize and fund our education system. Our schools tend to be smaller and more highly staffed, resulting in higher per pupil costs. Enrollment has declined significantly over the past twenty years. The AOE's own report on Vermont's Education Finance System echoes this Commission's identification of education finance, governance and delivery models as critically intersected

→ **Any policy consideration will require analysis across a number of key factors**

Such factors include: the overall policy goal; alignment with the identified guiding principles; actual fiscal impact (including when any savings would be realized)

[Link to Finance Subcommittee Working Document](#)

Timeframe Limitations

- **Achieving the level of study and engagement required in Act 183 will take time**
The six-month timeline given to the Commission for developing “short term cost-containment recommendations” was not sufficient for the level of study and analysis also required in the law
- **The public school budget development process is already nearing its conclusion**
This limits the ability of the general assembly to take action on education spending alone
- **Short term cost containment strategies are necessary but not sufficient**
Substantive change in the three policy areas will be required to fully address the challenges in the long term

3.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Affirm the purpose of the Commission

- The Commission was established with a charge of making policy recommendations to define the future of public education in Vermont. We are also keenly aware of the need for the general assembly to initiate policy actions this session
- As the administration and policy makers contemplate solutions, it is critical that efforts remain cohesive
- The Commission is uniquely suited to analyze the intersecting policy challenges and can play a role in ensuring that policy recommendations are thoroughly analyzed. Our communication and engagement apparatus can provide real-time opportunities for input on potential policy ideas
- The legislature must affirm and support the purpose of the Commission it created, even if it means adjusting the scope and charge of the Commission's work.

Continue to prioritize substantive, equitable community engagement

- The Commission continues to affirm the need for deep community engagement designed to bring additional voices and perspectives to this work, including those specifically named in Act 183
- While the Agency has undertaken important engagement activities as part of its own strategic planning, the Commission's charge stands separate from this engagement. The Commission is charged with capturing statewide perspectives related to the General Assembly's exploration of short-and long-term education policies.
- The communication and engagement infrastructure of the Commission is critical in order to center the voices of Vermonters that are not currently represented in the decision making bodies that exist

4.

QUESTIONS?