

The Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont –

Your Voice, Vermont's Future



Community Engagement Framework: A Guide to Equity-Centered Engagement

August 2025

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Acknowledgements

This framework was prepared by [Afton Partners](#) and [Collaborative Communications](#) for the [Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont](#). It includes adapted tools to assist with community engagement planning, implementation, and analysis, incorporating equity components inspired by nationally recognized racial equity and community engagement resources, such as:

- Racial equity and equity impact assessment tools
- Community engagement tools and spectrums
- Power mapping tools

All frameworks, tools, and models are cited in the References section of this document. Portions of the tools and guiding questions referenced throughout this framework were drafted with the assistance of AI-based writing tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI, 2025) and then reviewed, adapted, and refined by the Afton Partners project team to ensure accuracy and contextual relevance to Vermont's education landscape, and alignment with the Commission's [guiding equity principles](#).

We thank all contributors, including Commission members, community participants, and authors of the tools and resources that supported this work.



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Purpose

This framework provides guidance to individuals, organizations, and institutions seeking to gather input on legislative changes within Vermont's public education system. By offering tools, templates, and equity-centered strategies, users can elevate key design considerations throughout the engagement process and reduce barriers to meaningful participation. The framework also supports users' ongoing learning through the inclusion of equity knowledge resources, such as a glossary of terms and self-reflection exercises to deepen users' understanding and capacity to apply equity-centered principles in practice.

Recognizing that each Vermont community has its own context, priorities, history, and resources, this framework draws on insights from the Commission on the Future of Public Education's statewide engagement efforts held from August 2024 to June 2025 via public comment during Commission meetings and targeted listening sessions.

- For a summary of key insights and learnings, see **Appendix A: Commission Engagement Findings: August 2024 – April 2025** and **Appendix B: Commission Engagement Findings: May – June 2025**.
- For background on the Commission's engagement goals and purpose, see **Appendix C: Commission Key Messaging**.

The sections that follow include foundational concepts, guiding questions, and planning tools to support users at every stage of the engagement process. Hyperlinked worksheets and additional resources, listed in the **Appendices**, are provided to help tailor this framework to Vermont's local context and community priorities.





Equity Considerations

This framework is grounded in the definitions of equity adopted by the **Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont**.¹

Vermont's towns, regions, and school systems vary widely in size, demographics, priorities, history, priorities and available resources. While this framework draws on community engagement research, best practices, and Vermont-specific context, it does not claim to represent all perspectives or prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach. Framework users are encouraged to supplement with additional resources and seek input directly from the communities they serve or intend to engage to ensure relevance.

“While operationalizing the term **‘equity’** is a complex and varied task, the Commission is guided by the **following core understandings**:

- Equity **does not mean** equal or the same.
- Solutions with an equity focus **must be differentiated** by need.
- Equity must be considered both in terms of **inputs (access) and outputs (outcomes)**.”

— *Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont, Guiding Principles*

When planning and implementing engagement, users should consider the following equity principles:

- **Center historically underserved voices.** Engagement approaches should center the experiences, needs, and priorities of groups that have been systematically excluded or marginalized based on race, ethnicity, language, age, income, ability status, geography, sexual orientation, or other identities.
- **Gather multiple perspectives.** Engagement efforts should aim to include all voices across the public education system including but not limited to families, students, educators, providers, administrators, and school board members to gain clearer understanding of perspectives.
- **Lead with intention.** This framework is not prescriptive. Rather, it offers guidance, structure, tools, and recommendations to support equity-centered engagement that can and should be adapted to fit local contexts.
- **Commit to meaningful application.** Equity cannot be achieved through tools alone. The impact of this framework depends on how *thoughtfully, consistently, and authentically* it is applied in practice. This requires ongoing and proactive reflection, relationship-building, and accountability.

Embedding Equity Impact Assessments in Decision-Making



Applying an equity lens to community engagement ensures that decision-making processes proactively anticipate, identify, and address potential inequities before they occur. A common tool for doing so is an **Equity Impact Assessment (EIA)**. An EIA is a structured process, typically a specific set of questions designed to examine how proposed decisions may affect historically underserved communities. For a full definition and an example, please visit Race Forward's *What is Racial Equity?* Toolkit found on their website.²

Incorporating an EIA in community engagement supports users in surfacing potential racial and social equity impacts, identifying and mitigating harms, and designing for more equitable outcomes. When embedded throughout the engagement process, such as in the development of engagement goals, selection of desired audiences, and identification of engagement methods, an EIA helps ensure that those most directly impacted by an issue are not only included in the engagement but centered in the design process.

Elements of an EIA are woven throughout this framework, including in the guiding questions and planning tools listed in the Appendices. A standalone Equity Impact Assessment Rubric is included in **Appendix D: Equity Impact Assessment**, which users may apply to engagement-related decision making, as well as broader policy or programmatic decisions within the context of public education in Vermont. **This rubric was adapted from the State of Vermont's [Impact Assessment Tool](#), developed by the Office of Racial Equity**, and serves as a template for identifying how decisions may perpetuate or interrupt racial and social disparities.³

Engaging in Self Reflection

Equity-centered community engagement becomes a more authentic and impactful practice when grounded in intentional, ongoing self-reflection. Through this, well-meaning engagement efforts can go beyond good intentions to actively reduce the risk of reinforcing harm or further marginalizing historically underserved groups.

A core element of self-reflection is recognizing and addressing implicit bias. Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes, stereotypes, or assumptions that shape how we understand others, make decisions, and engage in relationships.⁴ These biases develop over time through socialization, media exposure, personal experience, and systemic norms perpetuated through government and other institutions, such as education. Because they operate outside of our awareness, bringing them to the forefront of our thinking during engagement planning and facilitation can go a long way towards making engagements more welcoming, inclusive, and accessible for all.



The following guiding questions can help examine patterns of comfort and discomfort, surface underlying assumptions, and assess how bias may influence which voices are heard, valued, or acted upon. Additional tools and resources to deepen self-reflection are included in **Appendix E: Additional Resources for Self-Reflection**.

Guiding Reflection Questions

- What communities or individuals do I feel most at ease engaging with and where do I notice discomfort or hesitation? Why?
- What assumptions or stereotypes might I carry about certain groups' perspectives, capacity, or credibility? Where did those ideas come from?
- When and how do I tend to make snap judgments (e.g., interpreting feedback, deciding whom to invite or trust)?
- In what ways might my bias influence how I prioritize, dismiss, or interpret input, especially across different communication styles or cultural norms?
- Are our decisions being shaped by those most impacted, or primarily by the most familiar, institutional, or vocal voices?





Define Your Purpose & Goals

An important component of designing any engagement effort is clarifying why you are engaging, what you hope to learn, and who will be most impacted by the decisions at hand. This section helps users narrow the purpose of the engagement, identify the challenge or issue, and name the communities most directly impacted as the first step to laying the foundation for equity-centered planning.

The guiding questions below support users in focusing their engagement with intentionality and accountability, ensuring that those close to the issue help shape both the process and the solution. A printable version of this section is available in **Appendix F: Engagement Planning Worksheet – Define Your Goal & Purpose for Engagement** for quick use when planning engagement.

Guiding Questions

Broad Purpose – What Do You Want to Learn?

- What is the challenge/issue and what are you aiming to solve, achieve, or learn through this engagement? Are you responding to a concern, testing an idea, shaping a new initiative, or addressing a gap?
- What information is missing from your current understanding? What is currently unclear or unknown?
- Will the results of this engagement influence a policy, program, resource allocation, or process? If so, how?
- What do you need to understand, and from whom, before making this decision or taking action?
- What specific questions do you need answered? (e.g., What barriers are families experiencing? What does quality look like for teachers, educators, or providers?)

Core elements of an Equity Impact Assessment included in this step:

- **Identifying** the underlying challenge or decision to be addressed
- **Naming** the groups most directly impacted
- **Clarifying** whose input is essential to inform equitable outcomes
- **Surfacing** gaps in understanding or potential blind spots
- **Assessing** root causes and systemic contributors



Targeted Goals – Who Do You Want to Learn From?

- Who are the key groups impacted by this issue?
- Can these groups be involved in the planning and engagement process? If not, how can you include them more intentionally?

Tip: Consider both *roles within the education system* (students, families, educators, providers, administrators), and *identity characteristics* such as race, income, ability status, geography, language, or other identities to determine which groups are directly impacted by an issue.

Naming Root Causes – What Are the Underlying Factors?

- Thinking broadly, what are the larger systemic issues or challenges related to the purpose of engagement?
- What assumptions about the issue at hand or the audiences who are directly impacted are you making that need to be tested?
- Are there past engagement findings that you're building on? If so, what gaps exist and what still needs to be explored?



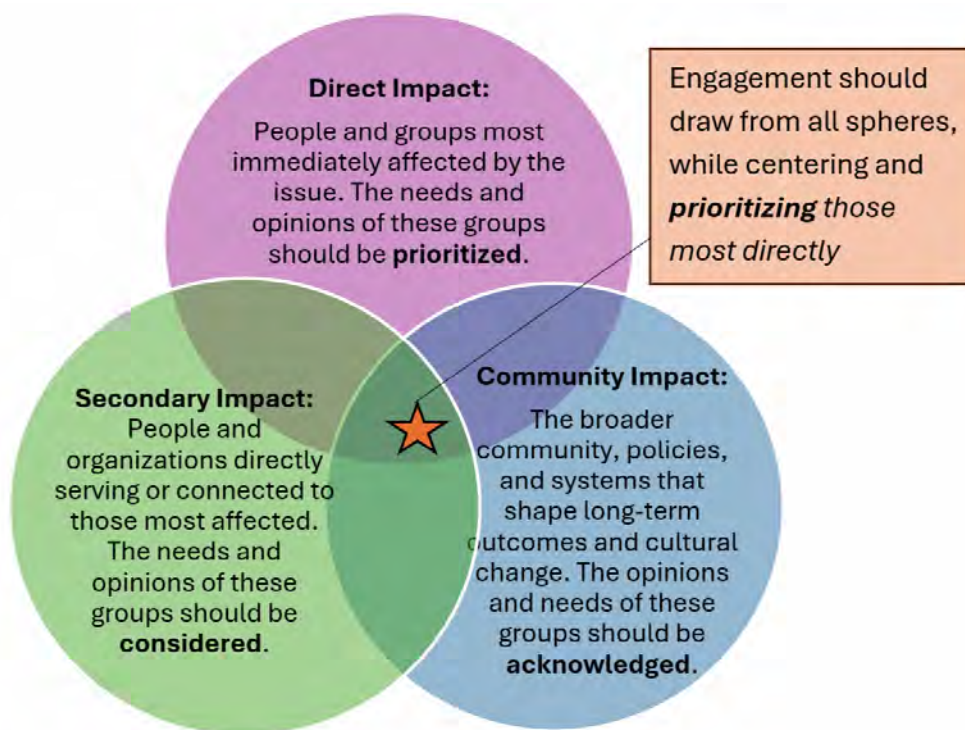


Design for Equity

With your purpose and goals defined, the next step is to translate those intentions into a process that elevates the leadership, experiences, and priorities of those most directly impacted by the issue at hand. This section helps users think critically about who should shape decisions, how to avoid tokenism, and how to use tools to identify gaps and ensure inclusive participation.

Centering Directly Impacted Groups

When planning engagement, it is important to recognize that decisions affect communities within the public education system at different levels. Building on the directly impacted groups identified in the previous section, use the spheres of impact to map where each group falls and identify any additional voices that should be included. The spheres of impact illustrate how stakeholder groups relate to the issue and clarify whose perspectives should guide decision-making.⁵



For example, when engaging communities on a proposal to reallocate state public education funding, *Direct Impact* groups may include students in underfunded districts, their families, and educators whose programs stand to lose or gain funding. *Secondary Impact* groups could include local school boards, superintendents, and other partners



that support school operations or personnel. *Community Impact* groups might include taxpayers, municipal leaders, and state policymakers whose decisions influence the long-term sustainability of education funding.

Guiding Questions

- What do you know about history, narratives, or systemic barriers affecting the directly impacted groups?
- What past harms or mistrust might shape how they engage with institutions or public systems?
- How can you avoid tokenizing these groups and instead meaningfully involve them in planning and decision-making?

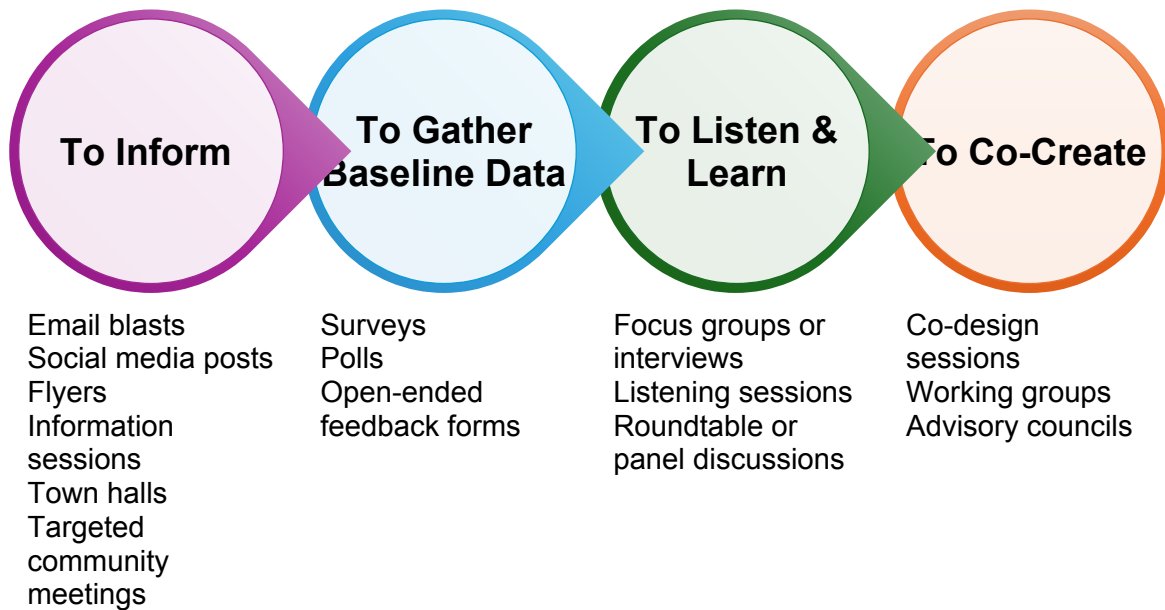




Methods for Meaningful Engagement

Meaningful engagement requires more than a one-size-fits-all approach.⁶ Relying on a single method can lead to a narrow or incomplete understanding of community needs and priorities, especially for historically underserved or directly impacted groups. A **mixed-methods approach** combines various data types, stories, and collaborative activities to build a full picture: what is happening, why it is happening, and how to address it. This approach strengthens both the validity and equity of the decisions being made by ensuring they are grounded in both numbers and lived experience.

The section below outlines the value of using varied engagement methods, concrete examples of each, and offers a practical example of how mixed methods can be applied. For a comprehensive tool to help you select and adapt engagement methods based on your engagement goals and target audiences, see **Appendix G: Engagement Planning Worksheet – Engagement Method Selection Worksheet**.



Goals of Engagement





What this Looks Like in Practice

A school district is trying to understand why high school attendance has declined over the past two years to inform a school closing. Using a **single method** such as analyzing attendance records would reveal *what* is happening (e.g., a 12% drop in attendance in grades 10 and 11). However, this alone does not explain the root causes.

To understand *why*, the district holds listening sessions with students and families, which surface deeper issues: transportation challenges, increased work hours, and a lack of connection to school culture.

To explore *how* to address these issues, the district organizes co-design workshops with directly impacted groups. Together, they identify potential solutions such as revised bus routes, after-school programs, and peer-to-peer support groups. By blending quantitative data, personal stories, and collaborative problem-solving, this mixed-methods approach results in more inclusive, actionable, and community-driven outcomes.

Guiding Questions

- Are we relying on a single method? If so, how can we ensure it is inclusive of the most impacted groups?
- How can directly impacted individuals help shape the messaging and interpretation of the data?
- In what ways can trusted community partners co-develop and disseminate engagement materials in culturally responsive ways?
- What steps are we taking to build trust now that lay the groundwork for deeper, sustained engagement in the future?

Examples of Trusted Community Partners in Vermont:

- Education Justice Coalition
- Friends of Public Education
- Outright Vermont
- Vermont Family Network
- Vermont Rural School Community Alliance
- Vermont Student Antiracism Network

For a **full list** of trusted partners that assisted the Commission with community engagement, see **Appendix H: List of Trusted Partners in Vermont for Community Outreach**. For a set of **sample emails** to send to trusted community partners and your target audiences, see **Appendix I: Sample Email to Trusted Community Partners** and **Appendix J: Sample Email to Target Audiences**.



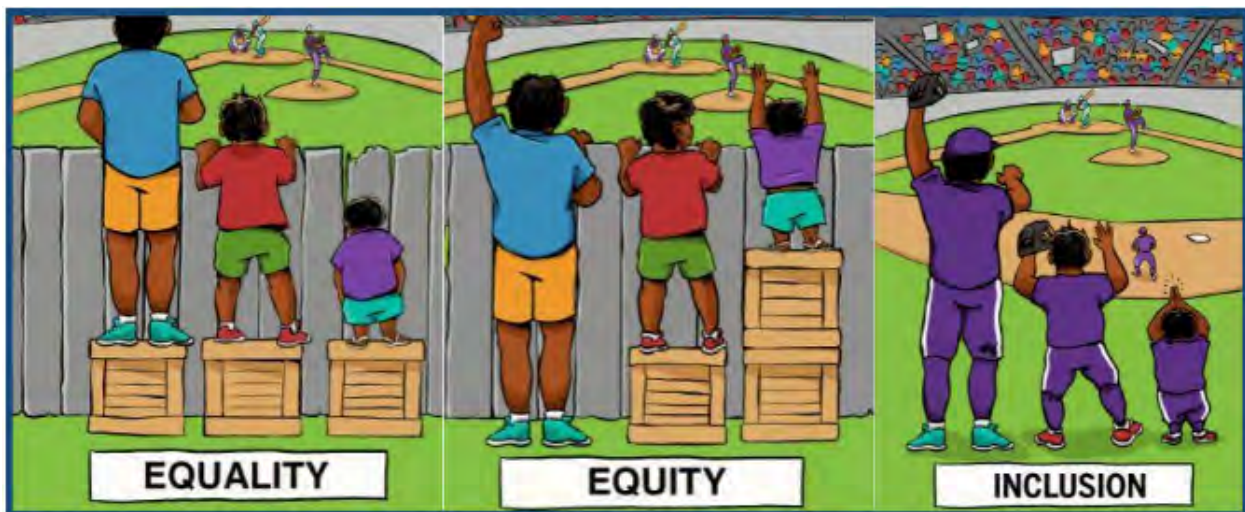
Removing Barriers to Access

Equitable engagement is not only about inviting participation but intentionally removing barriers so that directly impacted groups can meaningfully influence decisions. This includes designing engagement processes that are culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and logistically feasible for communities that have been historically excluded from education and policy-making conversations.

During the Commission's statewide engagement efforts, community members consistently named the following groups as needing greater representation in education decision-making and engagement efforts in Vermont:

- Families of children with disabilities
- Rural communities
- Multilingual learners
- Multicultural communities
- Communities of color
- Families with low socioeconomic status (SES)
- LGBTQIA+ students, families, and educators

These groups often face intersecting barriers, such as lack of transportation, language access, or time constraints that must be anticipated and addressed in the planning process. Engagement efforts should be built with, not just for, these communities. For a list of other common historically underserved groups, see [Appendix K: Sample List of Historically Marginalized or Underserved Groups](#).



The following subsections offer guidance for improving access for inclusivity.

Capture Demographics & Accurately Describe Communities



Collecting demographic information throughout your engagement—commonly captured through registration forms, polls, forms, and surveys—is an essential practice for tracking your engagement goals and reaching your target audience. Demographic data such as race, ethnicity, geographic location, role in the community (e.g., student, parent, teacher, administrator), and other relevant characteristics (e.g., age, income level, language abilities, disabilities) can help reinforce accountability and ensure that engagement and decision-making reflects the voices of those most directly impacted.

For a sample set of demographic questions you can transfer to a registration form or survey, see [Appendix L: Demographic Collection Guidance & Registration Template](#).

This type of data collection must be accompanied by thoughtful and respectful communication. Prioritizing asset-based language, which focuses on strengths, aspirations, and contributions rather than perceived deficits, is fundamental to building trust, avoiding stereotypes, and fostering meaningful, long-term relationships.⁷ Asset-based language helps shift from narratives that define people by their access to systemic institutions to ones that center their resilience and autonomy. For example, rather than describing families as “low-income,” consider “families experiencing economic hardship or economic barriers.”

Examples of Asset-Based Language for Describing Communities⁸

Avoid	Use Instead	Why
“The poor”	“People living with low income” / “families experiencing economic hardship”	Puts people before circumstance; avoids labeling as identity.
“At-risk youth”	“Young people navigating systemic barriers” / “youth impacted by inequities”	Focuses on systems, not blaming youth.
“Minorities”	“Communities of color” / “Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities” (be specific when possible)	“Minority” reinforces numerical/deficit lens; specificity honors identity.
“Vulnerable populations”	“Communities facing systemic barriers” / “communities disproportionately impacted”	Avoids framing people as inherently weak.

For a list of other asset-based language examples and a glossary of equity-related terms for knowledge-building, see [Appendix M: Strengths-Based Language for Describing Communities](#) and [Appendix N: Glossary of Terms](#).



Accessibility & Compensation Considerations

Designing for equity means creating spaces that are accessible, inclusive, and respectful of people's time, expertise, and lived experience regardless of whether the engagement is virtual or in person. Two essential components of equitable design are accessibility and participant compensation. These practices reduce participation barriers and ensure that historically underserved communities can engage meaningfully and with dignity.

Accessibility Considerations

As part of Vermont's commitment to equity and inclusion, the state has codified a set of accessibility policies grounded in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the ADA Amendments Act (ADAA), and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.⁹ These policies apply to both physical and digital spaces used in public programs, including community engagement. Vermont's accessibility policy is linked [here](#).

Removing accessibility barriers requires intentional planning and coordination during the design phase. Below are some strategies for ensuring inclusive participation:

- **For in-person events:** Provide maps, child care, meals, public transit guidance, ADA-accessible parking details, entrance and restroom information, and offer mileage or travel stipends where possible.
- **For virtual events:** Include Zoom instructions with captioning and transcript options, how to access interpretation channels, and dial-in information in plain language.
- **“Know Before You Go” communications:** Include instructions for accessing captioning or interpretation channels (e.g., American Sign Language or language interpretation, Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART) captions), and dial-in information.
- **Tailor supports using registration data:** Use demographic information to anticipate and plan for needs such as ASL, translation, or mobility support.

For an Accessibility Planning Checklist for in-person or virtual engagements, see [Appendix O: Accessibility Checklist for In-Person & Virtual Engagements](#).



Participant Compensation Benchmarks

Equitable community engagement also means providing compensation for participants' time, expertise, and lived experience. This is especially important when engaging community members who are not being paid through their professional roles to engage in discussions related to public education legislation changes, such as families, students, teachers, and educators.

The participant compensation benchmarks below are adapted from the *Participation Compensation Table* developed by the Center for Whole Communities, the Rights & Democracy Institute, and the Vermont Law and Graduate School's Environmental Justice (EJ) Clinic. These guidelines offer a starting point for budgeting engagement activities that are respectful, inclusive, and community centered. Compensation should always be adapted based on the local context, the level of time and labor requested, and the needs of the individuals involved.

The table includes recommended payment ranges by engagement method, along with notes on additional supports such as child care, meals, and interpretation services. Compensation levels should always be adapted based on the local context, the type of ask, and the specific needs of the participants involved. Click here to view the [original participation compensation table](#).

Engagement Method	Compensation Amount	Considerations
Focus Groups	\$50 per participant	Based on a 90-minute meeting. Consider offering additional supports such as child care and transportation for in-person sessions.
Community meetings or town halls	\$20–\$40 per participant	For 1–2 hour sessions. Should also include supports like meals, child care, and language interpretation.
Surveys	\$10–\$20 per response	Varies by length and format (online, phone, mailed, or in-person).
Advisory Groups or Co-Design Sessions	\$100 per person, per conversation	Offered as an honorarium for participants who are not being compensated through their professional roles.
Additional Supports	Variable	Child care, meals, and transportation are strongly encouraged for in-person events.
Accessibility Services	Variable	Includes interpretation, translation, and ASL. Vermont uses Vancro Integrated Interpreting Services for ASL. View Vermont Language Access Vendors



Engage Communities & Measure Success

Community-Centered Facilitation

Strong facilitation ensures participants feel respected, heard, and safe to share their perspectives. This is especially important when engaging communities that have been historically excluded from decisions or conversations on issues that directly impact their lives. Beyond gathering input or feedback, a deeper goal of community engagement is to build trust, mitigate harm, and empower participants to shape solutions. The way engagement is facilitated and the experiences participants have during that process can either reinforce exclusion or serve as a vehicle for healing and partnership.

A core principle of community-centered facilitation is **equity of voice**. Power dynamics often shape who feels comfortable speaking, whose perspectives are elevated, and whose contributions are acted upon. Facilitators have a responsibility to create conditions that support different communication styles, validate all contributions, and reduce real-time participation barriers. This begins with setting a respectful and inclusive tone at the beginning of a session, clearly explaining the session's goals, naming historical dynamics when relevant, co-establishing community norms, and clarifying how feedback will be used.

For a list of tangible engagement planning resources, facilitator and notetaker best practices and a session preparation checklist, see the following appendices:

- **Appendix P: Facilitation Best Practices**
- **Appendix Q: Notetaking Best Practices & Template**
- **Appendix R: Session Preparation Checklist**

Similarly, closing the loops with participants at the end of a session reinforces transparency and accountability. Expressing gratitude through compensation or thoughtful follow-up communications further signals that participants' time, lived experiences, insights, and expertise are valued and respected.



Guiding Questions

- How will I set the tone for openness, trust, and mutual respect at the start of the session?
- What steps will I take to reduce power dynamics or create role-specific spaces to ensure participants feel safe sharing honestly?
- How will I validate participants' experiences and contributions, especially when perspectives are emotionally charged or critical?
- What supports (e.g., interpretation, breaks, written options, compensation) will I offer to ensure accessibility and belonging?
- How will I follow up with participants and communicate how their input informed decisions?

What This Looks Like in Practice:

During a series of listening sessions facilitated by school board members in a rural Vermont district, the engagement team brought together parents, students, and teachers to discuss a potential school consolidation that would require students to travel hours to a new location. Early in the process, facilitators noticed that some students and educators hesitated to speak openly in large, mixed-role groups, particularly in front of administrators.

To address this, the team created role-specific breakout groups, allowing participants to speak candidly among peers. The session opened with a clear acknowledgment of how educators and rural families had often been left out of recent decision-making processes and emphasized that their input was essential to shaping future options.

Facilitators encouraged multiple modes of participation, including verbal sharing, written comments, and multilingual access (ASL and Spanish interpretation), to ensure that Deaf and Spanish-speaking families could engage fully. At the close of the session, the facilitation team summarized the feedback, explained how it would inform future decisions, and followed up with participants by email, sharing updates and materials influenced by their contributions. Each participant received a \$25 gift card and a thank-you note, reinforcing that their time and insights were valued.



Measures for Success

A successful engagement session goes beyond turnout or agenda completion. It should be assessed by whether it meaningfully reaches and engages those most impacted by the issue at hand. To evaluate this, equity centered key performance indicators (KPIs) should be embedded in both the planning and follow-up stages of engagement. These indicators help determine whether input was gathered from those directly impacted, issues were responded to effectively, and findings led to tangible improvements for historically underserved groups.

- **Participation metrics** are a critical starting point. Collecting and analyzing disaggregated data such as participant demographics by race/ethnicity, rural or urban location, grade level, language spoken at home, disability status, and income level helps identify whose voices are being heard and whose may still be missing. For example, an increase in engagement from rural families after offering transportation and child care supports could indicate that logistical barriers were effectively addressed.
- **Access indicators** can help determine whether equity considerations are built into the delivery of engagement opportunities and follow-up processes. For example, metrics like the percentage of multilingual families receiving interpretation and translation supports during meetings show whether language access was prioritized. Similarly, tracking the number of educators who receive professional development or other resources for addressing children's behavioral challenges in the classrooms compared to prior years can shed light on whether investments following an engagement were inclusive of feedback heard and equitably distributed.
- **Outcome and impact metrics** similarly provide a long-term view of whether engagement efforts are driving change. This may include increased enrollment of low-income students or students with disabilities in newly offered programs, or documented reduction in opportunity gaps for targeted student groups.
- **Feedback and satisfaction surveys** from directly impacted students, families, or educators also offer qualitative insights into whether engagement and resulting decisions led to responsive, respectful, and effective outcomes for those directly impacted.

Appendix B: Storing & Interpreting Community Engagement Data includes resources for interpreting and analyzing participant demographics.



Taken together, these indicators may create a fuller picture of what successful engagement looks like as part of a sustained, long-term commitment to fostering equity and accountability.

Closing the Loop with Participants

It is easy to end the engagement after feedback is collected. However, doing this often leaves participants unsure of what happened with their input and questioning whether their voices contributed to meaningful change. Closing the loop with participants by sharing back findings and leaving the door open for continued discussion is a critical step in building transparency, accountability, and fostering continued partnerships with communities.

Sharing back findings with participants in ways that are timely, transparent, and accessible encourages communities to process their contributions to the findings and is a key part of empowering communities to take their findings into their own communities. This requires clearly explaining what you heard, how the input shaped decisions (or didn't), where work is still ongoing, and where participants can continue lending their voice. When possible, it is also important to validate findings with participants before sharing them broadly with the public to avoid misrepresentation.

When done well, sharing back findings closes the engagement loop and signals to everyone in the process that community members are not just sources of data but partners in the process. It deepens trust and sets the stage for continued collaboration.

Tip: The following methods can help ensure you are communicating findings back to participants in a transparent, timely, and accessible manner:

- Create summaries of what you heard in accessible language and in multiple formats and languages.
- Share which decisions the input influenced, which it didn't, and why.
- Be honest about what you are still working on and where you hit limits.
- Consider hosting “debrief” sessions with directly impacted communities to validate themes and check for misinterpretations.
- Offer opportunities for people to ask questions, add to, or correct what has been shared back.

Guiding Questions

- Have we clearly communicated what participants shared, how it was used, and what will happen next?



- Did we validate findings with participants before finalizing them?
- Are our findings available in multiple languages, formats (written, visual, audio), and through trusted messengers?
- Are we communicating in plain, accessible language without jargon?
- Have we offered participants ways to respond, clarify, or challenge what's been summarized?
- Are we acknowledging where feedback may not be acted on and explaining why?





Closing

This framework was created to support individuals, organizations, and institutions in Vermont in designing and facilitating engagement that is inclusive, equitable, and community centered. It offers tools, questions, and practices to help users plan more intentionally, build trust more authentically, and share power more meaningfully with those most directly affected by public education policies and systems.

It is important to emphasize that no tool or framework can replace the ongoing work of reflection, relationship-building, and accountability. Equity-centered engagement is a continuous practice that evolves with each conversation, partnership, and lesson learned.

We encourage users to return to this framework often, adapt it to fit their local context, and use it as a springboard for deeper, sustained commitments to equity.



[Language | Health Communication | CDC](#)

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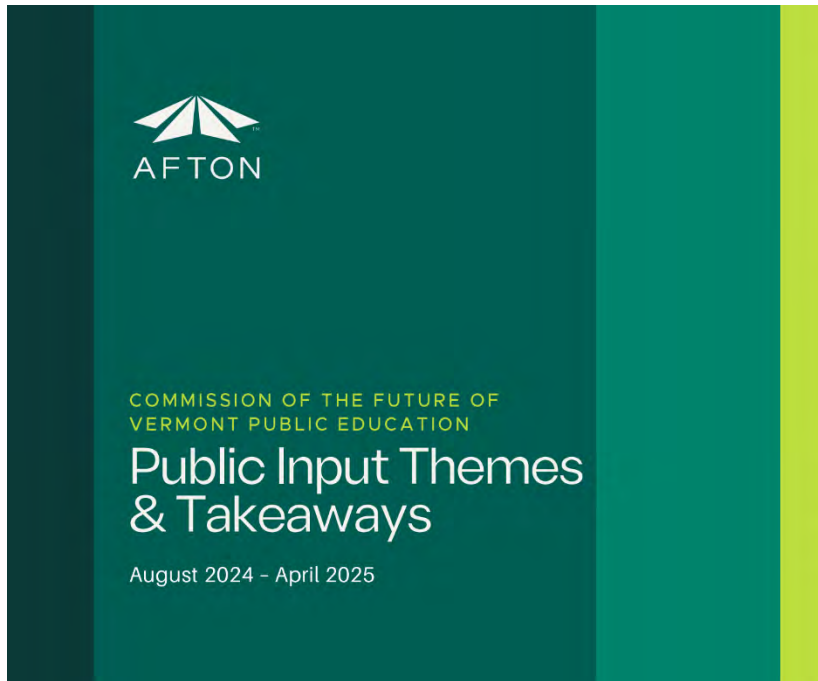


Endnotes



Appendices

Appendix A: Commission Engagement Findings: August 2024 – April 2025



This analysis includes public comments made during any Commission meetings from August 2024 – April 2025, including:

- Full Commission meetings
- Steering Committee meetings
- Education Finance Subcommittee meetings
- Communications & Engagement Subcommittee meetings
- Public Input Sessions



The Commission must make a **concerted effort to elevate underrepresented voices** in all stages of planning and decision-making. Without this, every recommendation risks lacking legitimacy or missing key perspectives.

Equity & Equitable Representation

"The Commission is made up of mostly privileged and dominant identities—there are no members of the commission who represent the most marginalized communities in the state. This has been an ongoing issue with the public."

- February 3rd Full Commission

"I do not see representatives from these underserved communities - their absence is glaringly absent. It is of the utmost importance that the list of auxiliary parties, starting with the Office of Racial Equity (ORE), are brought into this conversation and consulted."

- February 10th Steering Committee

- There is concern over the makeup of the Commission - members of the public feel that Commission members lack demographic diversity.
- There were calls for there to be higher representation of historically marginalized communities, such as:
 - Families with children with disabilities
 - Rural communities
 - Multilingual learners
 - Multicultural communities
 - Communities of color
 - Families with low SES
 - LGBTQIA+ partners (students, teachers)
- Participants support collaborating with various organizations to engage underserved communities, such as the Office of Racial Equity, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, Education Justice Coalition, the Vermont Student Anti-Racism Network, Winooski Parents & Students, among others
- Specific requests were also made to engage and make input sessions accessible for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind students

Members of the public have cited **lack of trust and communication from local school boards and the Agency of Education**. They urge the Commission to create **consistent norms and practices** to improve transparency around decision-making.

Communication, Trust & Transparency

"The Communications and Engagement subcommittee is one of the key elements of the Commission based on last year's lack of communication strategy from local school boards."

- July Full Commission

"Try to use less jargon in these meetings so that the general public can better understand—it can be off-putting."

- August Steering Committee

- There is a need for clear, accessible information to be made available for people to engage meaningfully.
- Examples mentioned include reducing jargon and clarifying technical terms to make spaces more accessible and inviting to members of the general public.
- Participants would like clarification on the Commission's purpose, workflows, subcommittee roles, and structures vs. other efforts, such as the AOE's Listen & Learn Tour.
- Requests were made to continue to publish meeting schedules, documents, and updates more consistently, as well as broaden outreach for input opportunities.



Members of the public are frustrated over the **lack of timely, accurate, and relevant data**. Without accurate, disaggregated, and shared data, the Commission cannot make effective decisions that center equity.

Data Access & Governance

"Little data has been shared with the Council despite our legislative mandate and multiple requests for cooperation from the AOE and grantees."

- September 5th Steering Committee

"Two of the major categories of data that the Council has recommended/requested ('Who is being served?' and 'What are the academic outcomes?') are similar to Data Sets that the Commission needs and apparently is having difficulty obtaining."

- September 5th Steering Committee

- There are concerns over AOE's inability or unwillingness to share data with advisory councils
- There were requests for data and transparency around whether school district consolidation results in cost savings or only cost shifts.
- Multiple participants have emphasized the need for disaggregated data by disability, race, ethnicity, and geography to address disparities and inform equitable processes and decision-making
- They have flagged discrepancies in student counts (e.g., for Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing students), which has raised concerns about the accuracy in oversight and funding allocation

There were **mixed views on consolidation savings under Act 46, as well as concerns over budget timelines, maintaining local autonomy, and school district disruptions**. Proposals that seemingly undermine core equity principles raised concerns and red flags for members of the public.

Education Finance

"Many people would appreciate a report of how much money was saved after Act 46."

- August 5th Steering Committee

"I suggest that the Education Finance Subcommittee include and convey to the legislature that further study is needed to assess school mergers and consolidation and its impact on savings. I caution against the idea that they reduce costs, they might actually be cost shifts."

- December 9th Education Finance Subcommittee

- Members of the public urge the Commission to avoid focusing narrowly on cost reduction and instead focus on how funding structures impact equity and quality.
- They also emphasized the need to uphold the *Bringham* decisions' core principle – equal educational opportunity regardless of district wealth.
- There's an interest in seeing the Commission learn from best practices from other states and to study the impact of student-centered funding reforms



PUBLIC INPUT SESSION

Chittenden County at South Burlington High School April 7th, 2025

Equity, Belonging, and Inclusion

Themes:

- Participants are deeply concerned about the erosion of equity, DEI efforts, and anti-racist practices in schools due to federal pressure and state leadership's responses
- There is a wide mistrust of AOE's education overhaul plan, which is seen as top-down, inequitable, and lacking community input
- Parents and educators emphasized the need for safe, inclusive, identity-affirming environments, especially for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students
- There is a desire to frame schools and education as a public good that supports the whole student/family, not just in academics.

"Any effort to undermine diversity, equity and inclusiveness efforts is a bad road to go down on all these issues."

- Virtual participant

"If we go with Governor Scott's education transformation policy, we are banking on cost savings by consolidating decision making power with the AOE and we cannot trust the AOE to look out for what is best for us."

- In-person participant

AFTON





Rural Schools, Community Hubs, and Local Control

Themes:

- There was strong defense of rural schools as **community anchors**. Participants shared they offer more than just academics (e.g., food, dental care, social services).
- Participants are worried that **existing resources and supports** (i.e., free breakfast and lunch) will be taken away due to cuts in funding.
- Participants fear school closures will **devastate rural towns**. There were repeated mentions of this hurting local economies, continuing to push youth out of the state, and reducing access to quality.
- There's a strong desire to maintain **local control and democratic governance**. There is skepticism about forced regionalization and consolidation.

"Schools are essential to communities... consolidation is not only a public education concern, it is an economic concern."

- Virtual participant

"Our Vermont learners need to survive whatever challenges are ahead... we need them to be autonomous thinkers."

- In-person participant, mental health counselor

AFTON



Governance and Consolidation

Themes:

- There was broad **resistance to mass district consolidation**, especially under the proposed 5-district model.
- While some see the potential in consolidation if designed thoughtfully and equitably, most argue the **cost-benefit rationale is flawed**, especially if it doesn't address deeper drivers like healthcare.
- Consolidation is viewed as **centralization of power**. Participants have fears of rural voices being drowned out.
- Participants feel that if consolidation were to occur, it would need to happen under careful consideration and with a **strong focus on equity**.
- Any unintended consequences for historically underserved communities need to be **identified and addressed** during the design process, prior to implementation

"Students with IEPs need to retain protections and support—don't weaken those under consolidation."

"We don't have an education affordability problem—we have a healthcare affordability problem. Any change that does not address healthcare costs will not solve the affordability crisis—it will just continue to starve our schools of needed funding."

- Virtual participants

"Consolidation wouldn't be terrible if it were done thoughtfully... Burlington and Winooski would be fine. Mass consolidation will kill small communities."

"If consolidation were done with local control, local communication—it could work. People won't support changes if they aren't involved in making them."

- Virtual participants

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Funding, Affordability, and Transparency

Themes:

- Participants emphasized the need to **replace property tax-based funding with income-based models**; property taxes are seen as inequitable and outdated.
- Healthcare costs are seen as the **main driver of school budget increases**, not inefficiencies or overstaffing.
- There were calls for **greater transparency and simplicity in the funding formula**, especially for local voters to make informed decisions on local budgets.

"If this is about cost savings, we need to be honest about where the cost burdens actually are—it's not just about taxing property"
- In-person participant

"The funding formula needs to be transparent and understandable. I've looked at it many times and still can't tell you how it all works."

"Districts that were meant to benefit from the new formula voted down their budgets because the system is so confusing."
- Virtual participants

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Education Quality and Workforce

Themes:

- Participants view strong **social-emotional learning (SEL), mental health, and teacher-student relationships** and supports as essential components to quality.
- They also define quality as **diverse pathways** (tech, college, service, trades) and not one-size-fits-all outcomes.
- Concern that **larger schools post-consolidation will reduce personalization** and increase teacher burnout.
- Educators expressed **exhaustion, burnout, and demoralization**, especially under uncertain reform proposals.
- Fear of **losing young teachers** due to budget cuts, job insecurity, and lack of institutional support.

"One of the most important outcomes for VT public schools will be creating a diverse range of pathways that transition into different post-secondary opportunities."

"Want to prepare students for whatever future path they choose (WF or higher ed); ensure all our schools can prepare them no matter where they are."
- Virtual participants

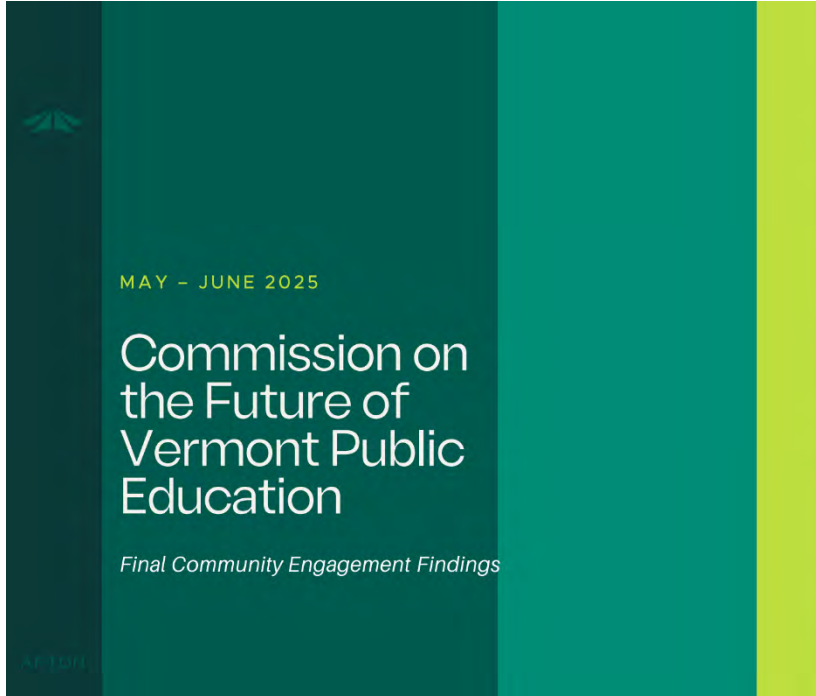
"It doesn't feel like the state has our back. Teachers are already doing too much, and now we're expected to do more with less."
"Our systems are already strained. Expanding them without adding support will break what's already fragile."
- In-person participants

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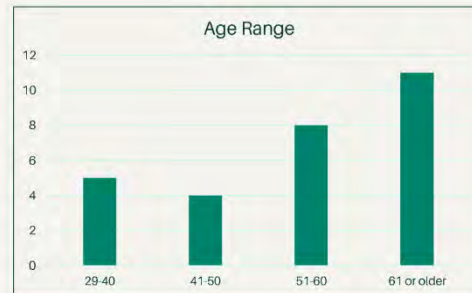


Appendix B: Commission Engagement Findings: May – June 2025



Participant Demographics

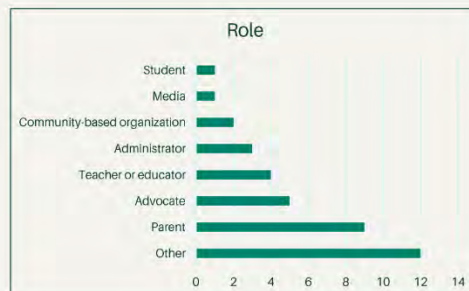
Across five listening sessions, from May 16 through June 11th, 2025, 34 people total have attended a listening session. Some people have attended a listening session more than once. The following graphs are optional, self-reported demographics from registration of attendees across five sessions.





Participant Demographics (cont.)

Limitations in this data include racial and ethnic inclusion from non-White participants, as well as inclusion from students. Responses written for the "Other" category include: community member, educational equity consultant, community organizer, school board member or chair, grandparent, and mentor.

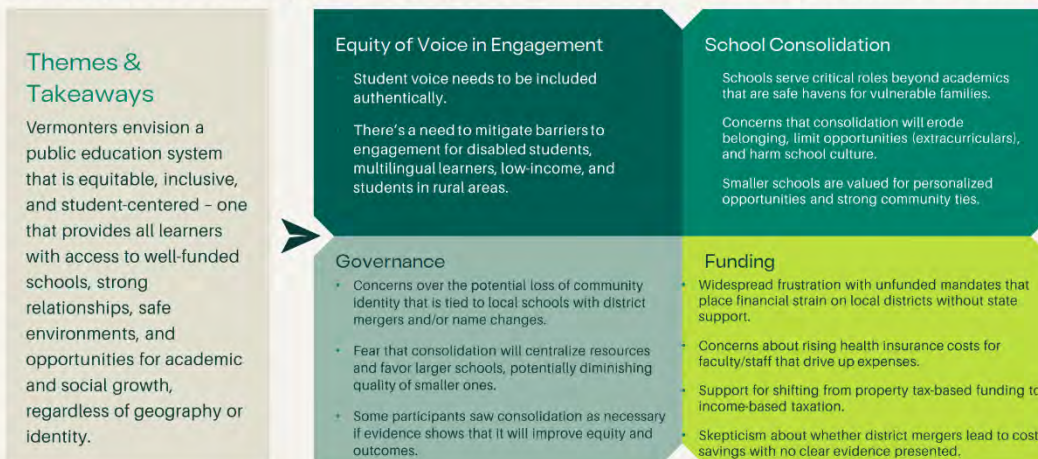


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Community Engagement Findings

Vermonters overwhelmingly felt that the education reform process was too rushed, with inadequate time for deep community engagement, particularly from vulnerable or historically underserved groups and those with "boots on the ground" – educators, students, and local boards.



AFTON





Engagement Themes (cont.)

Vermont's education reform efforts must slow down and center the voices of those most impacted such as students, families, and educators, by prioritizing equity, belonging, and local community identity over rushed structural changes that risk deepening disparities.

Educational Quality

- Students should graduate prepared for career, college, or other post-secondary paths.
- Dual enrollment, career and technical education, and civics education is important for students.
- Equity in quality means access to diverse perspectives, especially in racially homogenous communities to prepare students for a diverse world.

Guiding Principles for Education Transformation

- **Center voices of those most impacted**, particularly students, families in poverty, and marginalized groups.
- No changes to funding or governance without **equity safeguards**.
- Preserve and strengthen **small schools** where they serve as **vital community hubs**.
- Approach reform as a **marathon, not a sprint**. Slow down to ensure **thoughtful, inclusive, and equitable policy development**.

"My vision for an ideal public education system is rooted in providing the most opportunity for students at an affordable cost."

- Administrator, Essex County

"[The structures most important in supporting students' success] includes school size based on research. Supported by teachers who are happy in the schools and feel valued by the community."

- Parent and School Board Member, Addison County





Appendix C: Commission Key Messaging

The following key messages are internal materials that provide bank of content that can be used in a variety of materials for community engagement sessions. They can be included in slide decks and presentations, emails for outreach, press releases, invitations to community events, and responses to questions from the public and media.

The Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont

Vermont is considering changing its education approach. We're trying to build a fair and sustainable system ready for future challenges. Today's decisions will affect Vermont students and communities for years to come. The goal is to create a system that prepares every student to graduate high school ready for college, careers, or community involvement.

The Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont was created by the legislature to study Vermont's public education system and make recommendations to ensure all students are afforded quality educational opportunities in an efficient, sustainable, and equitable education system that will enable students to achieve the highest academic outcomes.

The Commission will recommend which roles, functions, and decisions should remain under local control and which should be managed at the state level. It will also propose a transparent, public process for monitoring the implementation of the act.

The Commission will make recommendations for the strategic policy changes necessary to make Vermont's educational vision a reality for all Vermont students.

We will work together under our guiding principles—Equity, Quality, Sustainability, and Affordability—to recommend meaningful, lasting policy changes that benefit all Vermonters.

This is an opportunity to provide input to the Commission to help shape the various education plans being proposed. The future of Vermont's education system should reflect the wisdom and priorities of the communities it serves.



Appendix D: Equity Impact Assessment Rubric

Equity Impact Assessment Rubric – Vermont Public Education Engagement

Adapted from the State of Vermont’s [Impact Assessment Tool](#) created by the Office of Racial Equity

Purpose

Use this tool to vet decisions in Vermont’s public education context, whether you are planning engagement, applying findings to policy or funding decisions, or implementing new strategies. This worksheet helps ensure that rural communities, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged families, and other historically underserved groups are meaningfully engaged and served. All categories can be used to vet engagement or non-engagement related decisions.

Instructions

- Complete this worksheet as a team at key decision points (design, approval, implementation, review).
- Document responses and commitments to action in the “Notes / Action Steps” column.
- Involve directly impacted communities in reviewing and validating your responses.
- Keep this document for accountability and revisit periodically to assess progress.

Category	Guiding Questions	Notes / Action Steps
Community Voice & Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have those most impacted been engaged from the start? • Are historically underserved groups in Vermont meaningfully included? • If key voices are missing, is there a clear plan and timeline to reach them before decisions are final? • Do community members have multiple culturally relevant ways to shape solutions, not just react? 	
Gathering Baseline Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data informs our outreach/decisions, and why? 	



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are disparities or groups underrepresented in the data? • What historical or contextual info is needed to interpret responsibly? • What questions remain? 	
Access & Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will this process reach those with the fewest resources or least access to decision-making? • What barriers may limit participation? • How will barriers be addressed in design and implementation? • Are trusted local partners helping bridge access gaps, especially in rural or historically excluded communities? 	
Framing & Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the issue framing acknowledge Vermont's historical inequities without reinforcing stereotypes or blame? • Are materials, outreach, and facilitation using inclusive, strengths-based, and culturally responsive language? • Have materials been checked for plain language, accessibility (screen-reader, large print), and translation into Vermont languages? • Have we accounted for cultural and regional contexts of both rural and urban Vermont communities? 	
Measures of Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What supports reduce knowledge gaps and build understanding? • How is success defined? • How is progress monitored and evaluated? • How will we report back—especially to directly impacted communities—in accessible, culturally relevant ways? 	
Long-Term Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will this process strengthen trust and access for historically underserved Vermont communities? • How might it address or worsen systemic inequities in public education 	



	<p>over time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does it build lasting, community-driven change reflecting the needs and visions of those most impacted?• Are we leaving tools, partnerships, or structures to sustain equitable engagement beyond this decision?	
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Appendix E: Additional Resources for Self-Reflection

- [Implicit Association Test](#) – An interactive tool to explore unconscious associations related to race, gender, age, and more (Harvard Project Implicit).
- [That Lion Made a Monkey Out of Me: Taking Implicit Bias by the Tail](#) – A guide with accessible explanations of bias and reflective strategies.
- [Implicit Bias Insights as Preconditions to Structural Change](#) – Article by John Powell & Rachel Godsil exploring how personal awareness of bias connects to institutional transformation (published in Poverty & Race by PRRAC).
- [National Equity Project: Implicit Bias Resource](#) – Overview of how implicit bias shows up in systems and how to address it in equity work.
- [End Racism in Our Lifetime](#) – A forward-thinking resource emphasizing both individual reflection and collective action toward racial equity.
- [Within Our Lifetime \(WOL\) Implicit Bias Toolkit](#) – A practical toolkit with exercises, facilitation tips, and frameworks for addressing implicit bias within organizations and communities.



Appendix F: Engagement Planning Worksheet – Define Your Goal & Purpose for Engagement

Define Your Goal & Purpose for Engagement

Instructions: Use this tool to define your engagement purpose, identify impacted groups, and surface root causes. For the full guide, see *Step 1: Define Your Purpose & Goals* in the **Community Engagement Framework: A Guide to Equity-Centered Engagement** by the Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont. This condensed version is designed for quick reference.

Broad Purpose – What Do You Want to Learn?

What is the challenge/issue?

What are you aiming to solve, achieve, or learn through this engagement? Are you responding to a concern, testing an idea, shaping a new initiative, or addressing a gap?

- Responding to a concern
- Testing an idea
- Shaping a new initiative
- Addressing a gap

Details:

What information is missing or unclear in your current understanding?

Will the results of this engagement influence a policy, program, resource allocation, or process? If so, how?



What do you need to understand, and from whom, before making this decision or taking action?

What specific questions do you need answered? (E.g., What barriers are families experiencing? What does quality look like for teachers, educators, or providers?)



Targeted Goals – Who Do You Want to Learn From?

List the key groups impacted by this issue.

Tip: Consider both *roles within the education system* (students, families, educators, providers, administrators), and *identity characteristics* such as race, income, ability status, geography, language, or other identities to determine which groups are directly impacted by an issue.

How can these groups be involved in planning and engagement?

If not directly involved, how can you include them more intentionally?



Naming Root Causes – What Are the Underlying Factors?

Thinking broadly, what are the larger systemic issues or challenges related to the purpose of engagement?

What assumptions about the issue at hand or the audiences who are directly impacted are you making that need to be tested?

Are there past engagement findings that you're building on? If so, what gaps exist and what still needs to be explored?



Appendix G: Engagement Planning Worksheet – Engagement Method Selection Worksheet

Engagement Method Selection Tool

Instructions: This tool is designed to help you select, evaluate, and adapt engagement methods with an equity lens. Use this tool after completing the “Define Your Purpose & Goals.” While the *Design for Equity* section in the **Community Engagement Framework: A Guide to Equity-Centered Engagement** offers a broad overview of various engagement methods and their uses, this worksheet provides specific prompts to ensure your approach meaningfully centers historically underserved communities in Vermont.

Framework: A Guide to Equity-Centered Engagement offers a broad overview of various engagement methods and their uses, this worksheet provides specific prompts to ensure your approach meaningfully centers historically underserved communities in Vermont.

Use it at the earliest stages of planning to:

1. **Select** the most appropriate methods for your goals.
2. **Identify** equity considerations and potential barriers to participation.
3. **Document** adaptations to ensure inclusion, accessibility, and trust.
4. **Create** an engagement record that can be revisited or refined throughout the process.

Engagement Method Matrix

Engagement Type	Purpose	Sample Methods	Equity Considerations
Inform (Least inclusive)	Share updates, clarify what is happening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email blasts to school district listservs • Flyers in public libraries, community centers, and general stores in rural towns • Social media posts on local community pages • Information sessions and town halls • Announcements through local newspapers or radio stations 	One-way communication can overlook those most impacted. Risk of excluding rural residents, multilingual families, and those without internet access.
Gather Baseline Data	Collect data to inform planning and decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys distributed through schools or mailed to households • Polls at school board or 	Numbers alone may erase context or community voice; some groups



		<p>Commission meetings, information sessions, or town halls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended forms for students and families at events 	<p>may be less likely to respond due to access, language, or trust issues.</p>
Listen & Learn	Understand lived experiences, needs, and perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups with service providers and teachers in rural school districts • Listening sessions with multilingual families in partnership with cultural organizations • Interviews with students with disabilities • Panel discussions with local community leaders and youth advocates 	<p>Requires transparency, trust, and reciprocity; must account for cultural norms, language needs, and participant safety.</p>
Co-Create <i>(Most inclusive)</i>	Collaboratively shape solutions, policies, or practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-design sessions with parents and teachers from underfunded districts • Working groups including rural superintendents, teachers, and youth representatives • Advisory councils with students, providers, and school board members 	<p>Requires intentional power-sharing, readiness to adapt based on community leadership, and removal of structural barriers to participation.</p>



Method Alignment Checklist

1. Which method(s) will you use? Check all that apply. (*Note: the most effective approach will utilize more than one method*)

- Inform – Share updates, clarify what is happening
- Gather Baseline Data – Collect information to inform planning and decisions
- Listen & Learn – Understand lived experiences, needs, and perspectives
- Co-Create – Collaboratively shape solutions, policies, or practices

2. How does this method support the overall purpose and targeted goals identified in the previous section, “Identify Your Goals & Purpose for Engagement”? Which specific questions will this method help answer?

3. How will directly impacted groups you identified in the previous section be involved in *planning* this engagement? How will these groups be involved in *the engagement itself*?

4. How can we make this method more accessible and inclusive for historically underserved groups? (*e.g., translation, stipends, childcare, transportation, virtual access*) Which trusted messengers or partners can help increase our reach?



Appendix H: List of Trusted Partners in Vermont for Community Outreach

This is a list of community partners that helped the Commission on the Future of Public Education's engagement efforts during spring 2025. This is *not* a comprehensive list of organizations that serve historically underserved communities in Vermont.

- AALV
- ACLU of Vermont
- Addison County BIPOC+
- African Student Association (UVM)
- Atowi
- Bethel Equity and Inclusion Committee
- Burlington Community Justice Center
- Burlington Yoga Equity Project
- Building Fearless Futures
- CEMS Office of Equity, Belonging, and Student Engagement (UVM)
- Capstone Community Action
- Champlain Area NAACP
- Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
- City of Burlington Office of Racial Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (REIB)
- Clemmons Family Farm
- Community Resilience Organizations
- Community Restorative Justice Center
- Conscious Homestead
- ECDC Vermont
- Education Justice Coalition of Vermont
- Friends of Public Education
- Glover Equity Group
- Greater Burlington Multicultural Resource Center
- Green Mountain Self-Advocates
- Lamoille Restorative Justice Center
- Middlebury Yoga Equity Project
- Migrant Justice
- Neighborhood Connections
- Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)
- Out in the Open
- Outright Vermont



- Office of Racial Equity
- Pathways Vermont
- Peace and Justice Center
- People's Kitchen
- PFlag Dorset
- Pride Center of Vermont
- Queer Connect
- Rutland Area Branch of the NAACP
- Rutland County Pride
- Shelburne Equity and Diversity Committee
- Southeastern Vermont Community Action
- The Creative Discourse Group
- The Institute for Liberatory Innovation
- The Root Social Justice Center
- Thrive by Pride Center
- Upper Valley BIPOC Network
- USCRI Vermont (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants)
- Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports
- Vermont Afghan Alliance
- Vermont Association of the Deaf
- Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR)
- Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR)
- Vermont Interfaith Action
- Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity
- Vermont Professionals of Color Network
- Vermont Racial Justice Alliance
- Vermont Releaf Collective
- Vermont Students Anti-Racism Network
- Vermont Works for Women
- Windham County NAACP



Appendix I: Sample Email to Trusted Community Partners

Subject: Join Us in Centering Community Voices on Vermont's Public Education

Dear [Partner Name],

We're reaching out to invite your partnership in shaping the future of Vermont's public education system. As part of our community engagement efforts, we're hosting a [focus group/listening session/etc.] to hear from [target audience -families, students, educators, and community members].

We deeply value your connection to [specific community – e.g., multilingual families, rural youth, etc.], and we hope you can help us spread the word or co-host a session to ensure these voices are included.

Event Details: [Date, Time, Format]

Ways you can support:

- Share the flyer (attached) with your network
- Help identify trusted messengers or co-facilitators
- Host or co-host a session with us

[Optional] Attached below is an email you can send to your network:

[Insert email to target audience here]

Please let us know if you're interested or you would like to jump on a quick call to learn more about this initiative. Thank you for all you do to uplift Vermont communities.

With gratitude,

[Your Name / Organization]

Tip: Consider adding a flyer and attaching it to the emails and/or posting on social media. This is helpful to reach youth and families.



Appendix J: Sample Email to Target Audiences

Subject: *We want to hear from you! Help shape the future of public education in Vermont*

Hello,

Are you a [target audience - student/family/educator/provider] in Vermont? We want to hear from you!

The [your organization] is hosting a series of [virtual or in-person] [engagement method – a series of listening sessions/focus groups/etc.] to learn about [the objectives of your engagement]. Your experience and expertise are invaluable in informing the future of public education in Vermont.

Engagement details:

- When: [Insert date/time]
- Where: [Location or Zoom link]
- Registration link: [insert]

[Optional but strongly encouraged]: Language interpretation and accessibility accommodations are available upon request. Let us know how we can support you in participating.

Thank you for being part of this important work, and we look forward to meeting with you soon!

– [Your name/team]



Appendix K: Sample List of Historically Marginalized or Underserved Groups

To ensure broad and inclusive engagement, it's also important to be mindful of other historically excluded groups, including:

- Indigenous communities
- Migrant and undocumented families
- Foster youth and youth in state custody
- Students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity
- Students involved in the juvenile justice or criminal legal system
- Families with limited digital access or technology
- English language learners and newcomers
- Young caregivers (youth responsible for caregiving duties)
- Refugee and asylee populations
- Families navigating mental health or substance use challenges
- Formerly incarcerated individuals
- Religious minorities
- Low-income single-parent households
- Students in alternative or therapeutic education settings



Appendix L: Demographic Collection Guidance & Registration Template

Engagement Method Selection Tool

Description: Whether virtual or in-person, each engagement should collect demographic information to identify gaps in outreach and perspectives. Use the fields below as a guidance to collecting demographic information through registration forms, surveys, or polls at your next engagement.

Instructions: Use Microsoft Word (for in-person), or (for virtual) Google Forms, Microsoft Forms, or Zoom registration. Similarly, during the engagement, be sure you capture attendees. Virtually, you can pull this from a Zoom report and for in-person, you can create a sign-in sheet to pass around among participants.

Tip: The attendance sheet plus the registration information will give you a better picture of the communities you've engaged. Use this information to determine if there are gaps in your feedback or outreach and create an action plan to address those gaps. If unable to address the gaps, be sure to describe demographic information in a final share-out and describe the limitations.

Sample Registration Template

Registration Field	Format	Notes
Name	Text	
Email	Text	
City, zip code, or county you live in	Text	To assess geographic representation, choose the type (county, zip code or both) that suits your needs.
City, zip code, or county you work in	Text	
Which group(s) do you represent or identify with? Select all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student • Parent • Teacher or educator • Service provider • Advocate • Administrator • School board member • Legislature • Agency staff • Media 	Tailor the responses to fit your engagement method.



<p>Which populations do you predominantly serve or which of the following best describes you/your family?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other (write-in) <p>Select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilingual learner • Requires financial assistance or is in the free-reduced lunch program • Has a disability or has a child with disabilities • Has to travel a long distance (over 1 hour) to attend school • Early childhood age child (or children) – 0 to 5 years old 	
<p>Which of the following racial/ethnic populations do you predominantly serve (if families or students, skip to next question)</p>	<p>Select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian or Alaska Native • Asian • Black or African American • Hispanic or Latino • Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander • White • Multiracial • Prefer not to say • All of the above • Other (write-in) 	
<p>What is your age range?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 18 • 18-29 • 30-39 • 40-49 • 50-59 • 60+ 	
<p>Do you require interpretation and translation? If yes, what language?</p>	<p>Text</p>	
<p>What other accessibility accommodations do you require? We will try our best to meet your needs.</p>	<p>Text</p>	
<p>Can we contact</p>	<p>Yes</p>	

Your Voice, Vermont's Future



you for additional follow-up?	No	
Is there something else you would like us to know?	Text	



Appendix M: Strengths-Based Language for Describing Communities

Avoid	Use Instead	Why
“The poor”	“People living with low income” / “families experiencing economic hardship”	Puts people before circumstance; avoids labeling as identity.
“At-risk youth”	“Young people navigating systemic barriers” / “youth impacted by inequities”	Focuses on systems, not blaming youth.
“Hard to reach”	“Communities historically excluded from decision-making” / “communities not equitably engaged by systems”	Shifts responsibility to systems, not communities.
“Minorities”	“Communities of color” / “Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities” (be specific when possible)	“Minority” reinforces numerical/deficit lens; specificity honors identity.
“The underserved”	“Communities that have been systematically underserved”	Names systemic cause, not innate trait.
“Disadvantaged groups”	“Historically marginalized communities” / “systematically excluded communities”	Recognizes history and systemic nature of inequity.
“Vulnerable populations”	“Communities facing systemic barriers” / “communities disproportionately impacted”	Avoids framing people as inherently weak.
“Non-English speakers”	“Multilingual learners” / “families whose home language is not English”	Recognizes assets of multilingualism.
“Immigrants and aliens”	“Immigrant and refugee communities” / “new Americans” (if they use that term)	“Alien” is dehumanizing; respect self-identification.
“Illegals”	“Undocumented residents” / “people without immigration status”	Centers humanity and dignity.



“Handicapped / the disabled”	“People with disabilities” / “disabled people” (if that’s how the community self-identifies)	People-first, unless group explicitly embraces identity-first language.
“Ex-offenders”	“Formerly incarcerated people” / “people impacted by the justice system”	Reduces stigma and defines people beyond criminal history.
“High-crime community”	“Community over-policed due to systemic inequities” / “community facing concentrated disinvestment”	Avoids blaming residents for structural issues.
“Single mothers” (as shorthand for hardship)	“Mothers parenting independently” / “families led by women”	Avoids deficit association with family structure.
“Uneducated”	“People with limited access to formal education”	Avoids judgment and acknowledges barriers to education.
“Homeless people”	“People experiencing homelessness” / “unhoused individuals”	Recognizes condition, not identity.
“Poor Black neighborhoods”	“Black communities navigating economic disinvestment” / “neighborhoods impacted by structural racism”	Shifts away from deficit labeling; acknowledges systemic racism.



Appendix N: Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Access / Accessibility	The degree to which environments, services, and processes are usable by all people, especially those with disabilities or language needs.
Antiracism	The active process of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, policies, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism. It involves taking action to dismantle racial inequities.
Co-Design / Co-Creation	A collaborative process in which people with lived experience partner with system leaders to design solutions, centering their expertise.
Community Engagement	Meaningful participation by impacted communities in shaping, implementing, and evaluating policies and solutions that affect their lives. Effective engagement centers community voice, builds trust, and redistributes decision-making power.
Community Impact	The broader community, policies, and systems that share long-term outcomes and influence cultural change.
Cultural Competence / Cultural Responsiveness	The ability to understand and interact effectively with people across cultures. In engagement, this means designing practices that affirm diverse identities.
Direct Impact	Refers to people or groups that are most immediately affected by an issue.
Educational Equity	Every student receives the resources, opportunities, and support they need to succeed, recognizing that these may differ based on individual and systemic factors.
Equality	Sameness: everyone gets the same thing regardless of need. Equality focuses on uniform access but often ignores the realities of historical exclusion and power differentials. Example: giving everyone the same size ladder even if some start in a hole.
Equity	A commitment to ensuring that all people, especially those historically excluded, have the conditions and resources they need to thrive. Equity recognizes systemic barriers and aims to produce fair outcomes through targeted strategies.
Explicit Bias	Conscious attitudes and beliefs about a person or group; also known as overt and intentional bias.
Historical Exclusion / Structural Exclusion	The systematic removal or ignoring of communities from access to policies, benefits, or decision-making over time.
Implicit Bias	Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, decisions,



	and actions in an unconscious manner.
Individual Bias	Bias expressed by individuals. When expressed by someone acting in an institutional role, this can reflect broader institutional bias.
Institutional Bias	Bias embedded in policies, practices, and norms of institutions that systematically disadvantage certain groups.
Lived Experience	Knowledge and insight gained through direct, personal experience with an issue.
Marginalization	The maintaining of the status quo given that current systems have been designed to exclude certain populations from ownership and decision-making. Without intentional action, marginalization persists.
Racism	A system of advantage based on race, reinforced by institutional structures, cultural messages, and individual behaviors that uphold racial hierarchies.
Secondary Impact	Refers to people or organizations directly serving or connected to those most affected by an issue.
Systemic Racism	The interaction of institutional policies and cultural norms that maintain racial inequity across systems.



Appendix O: Accessibility Checklist for In-Person & Virtual Engagements

Accommodation	In-Person	Virtual	Response/Notes
Language Access	Live interpreter available	Live interpreter or simultaneous captions	
	Materials translated	Materials translated	
Location Access	Central community location	N/A	
	ADA-compliant venue	N/A	
	Child care offered or child-friendly space	N/A	
	Seating and restrooms available	N/A	
Technology Access	Transportation guidance provided	N/A	
	Hybrid or follow-up options offered	Call-in number available	
	N/A	Allow early log-in for tech support	
Visual Access	Large print handouts, high-contrast visuals	Slide decks use large fonts and high contrast	
Hearing Access	ASL interpreter	Live captioning (Zoom, CART, Otter.ai, etc.)	



Appendix P: Facilitation Best Practices

Facilitation Best Practices

1. Ground the Session

- Clearly state the session's purpose, goals, and how input will be used.
- Name power dynamics directly (e.g., "We know families haven't always been included in decisions about their child's schooling. Your input is invaluable.>").
- Emphasize that participation is voluntary and input will remain confidential.
- Review group norms and invite participants to suggest revisions.

2. Foster Belonging and Inclusion

- Welcome all modes of participation, including verbal, written, and nonverbal contributions.
- Avoid interrupting and allow pauses for reflection.
- Use inclusive language such as "you all" or "what's working well?"
- Avoid exclusionary or harmful phrases (e.g., "master checklist," "shoot me an email").

3. Support Emotional Safety

- Pay attention to tone or body language that may signal discomfort.
- Validate contributions and emotions (e.g., "Thank you for sharing; I understand this is a difficult topic.>").
- Encourage breaks as needed to care for yourself and others.

4. Center Equity of Voice

- Group participants by role when needed to reduce power imbalances (e.g., avoid mixing administrators with students or teachers when discussing sensitive school issues).
- Ask follow-up questions to deepen understanding, not to challenge validity.

5. Close the Loop

- Summarize key themes and insights from the session.
- Share next steps and clarify when/how participants will receive follow-up.
- Thank participants for their time, trust, and contributions.
- Provide stipend details, including payment process and timeline.



Group Norms

Review and co-create these norms with participants at the start of the session. Invite revisions to ensure they reflect the group's values and cultural context.

Recommended Norms (*adapt and iterate as needed*)

- Speak from your own lived experience.
- Step up, step back—be mindful of airtime.
- Embrace differences without judgment.
- Use respectful, inclusive language.
- Honor confidentiality.
- Assume good intent, while acknowledging impact.
- Care for yourself as needed.
- Recognize this is a brave space, not always a safe space.

Recording Guidance

If you record a session (audio or video), follow these best practices:

- Clearly inform participants why you're recording and how it will be used.
- Use recordings only to supplement notetaking, not to replace it.
- Transcribe and anonymize recordings before analysis or reporting.
- Provide the option to opt out of being recorded, or attend a separate session.

Tip: Clearly state how participants' information will be kept confidential. If sessions are being recorded, seek consent and explain why.



Appendix Q: Notetaking Best Practices & Template

Notetaking Best Practices

High-quality, respectful notes help preserve participant trust, ensure accuracy, and support meaningful follow-up.

Honor Anonymity

- Do not include names without explicit consent.
- Use stakeholder roles or general identifiers (e.g., “parent from urban district,” “child care provider,” “student of color”).
- Avoid listing school names, districts, or program affiliations unless essential and permission is given.

Capture Direct Language

- Record what was said, not your interpretation.
- Reflect participants’ exact words whenever possible to preserve intent.
- Highlight 1–2 powerful quotes per session, using role identifiers only (e.g., Family child care provider said, “I feel invisible in the system.”).

Describe Tone & Group Dynamics

- Use neutral, observable descriptions of reactions:
 - “Participants nodded in agreement.”
 - “Several attendees expressed concern.”
 - “A few shook their heads and became quiet.”
- Avoid assumptions about emotions or assigning intent beyond what’s observed.

Support Follow-Up & Accountability

- Flag comments, questions, or themes that require follow-up.
- Note recurring concerns that could inform future engagements or decisions.
- Use symbols or bold text to tag these items for easy review later.

Notetaking Template

Please use this template below to capture notes. Tip: Before using this template, make sure notetakers understand the purpose of the session, key questions being asked, and how notes will be used. Consider printing this section for in-person engagements or using Word or Excel to capture notes for virtual ones. Use notes to identify themes and inform decisions.



Session Details	
Date	
Facilitator(s)	
Notetaker(s)	
Location / Format	(e.g., Zoom, in-person)
Attendees	

Discussion Question / Prompt	Notes: Key Themes & Insights	Notable Quotes or Examples



Appendix R: Session Preparation Checklist

Use this checklist to plan and implement an engagement session. Incorporate these items into your run-of-show and facilitation script.

Task	Response (Y/N)	Notes/Action Items
<p>Review session goals and clearly define the purpose of the engagement</p> <p><i>Tip: Ensure participants understand why they are being asked to share input and how it will be used. Be explicit about who is being centered and why.</i></p>		
<p>Review registration list to determine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of attendees, facilitators, and breakout rooms needed • If interpretation, bilingual facilitation, or translated materials are needed • Any requested accommodations 		
<p>Hold a prep session with facilitators, notetakers, and partners (if applicable)</p> <p><i>Tip: Review goals, agenda, breakout assignments, and tech needs.</i></p>		



<p>Finalize the session content and materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome and introductions • Purpose and goals of engagement • Group norms or community agreements • Discussion or reflection questions • Closing and next steps 		
<p>Debrief with facilitation team. Capture lessons learned, note improvements for future sessions.</p>		
<p>Compile notes and summarize themes.</p> <p>Begin synthesis and validate with partners or community if needed.</p>		
<p>Prepare share-back materials. Ensure clarity, accessibility, and transparency.</p>		
<p>Follow up with participants. Send thank-you email, provide updates or opportunities to stay involved.</p>		



Appendix S: Storing & Interpreting Community Engagement Data

Storing & Interpreting Community Engagement Data

This step guides users in handling, analyzing, and sharing engagement findings in a **responsible, transparent, and equity-centered** manner. The process includes three stages:

1. Handling and storing data
2. Analyzing and interpreting data
3. Sharing back with communities

Handling & Storing Data

Follow this guidance to ensure you are protecting participant privacy and reducing the risk of harm:

- Securely store all raw data (notes, recordings, transcripts) in password-protected or access-limited locations.
- De-identify data as soon as possible by removing names, locations, or other details that could identify individuals.
- Do not share direct quotes publicly without explicit participant consent.
- When using stakeholder identifiers (e.g., “Spanish-speaking parent,” “high school student”), ensure they are broad enough to protect anonymity while still giving voice to underrepresented groups.

Guiding Questions

- Have we protected participants’ identities, especially historically marginalized or directly impacted groups?
- Who has access to the raw data and is that access justified by their role?
- Has our technology for storing data been vetted for security and accessibility?

Analyzing & Interpreting Input through an Equity Lens

Follow this guidance to assess meaning, knowledge gaps, and impact.

- Don’t just track how many people said something. Ask who said it, why it matters, and who is missing.
- Elevate the voices of directly impacted participants, especially when their input diverges from more privileged stakeholders.



- Identify themes, tensions, and contradictions, not just consensus.
- Consider historical context, cultural dynamics, and power structures when interpreting responses.
- Look for root causes, not just surface-level problems.
- If your team lacks experience with the issue, consider co-analyzing with community partners or advisory groups.

Guiding Questions

- Are we centering the voices of people most impacted by the issue, not just those with the most time or privilege to engage?
- Whose perspectives are underrepresented in the data? Why might that be?
- Are we unintentionally interpreting data through a dominant cultural or institutional lens?
- Have we disaggregated data (when appropriate) to examine equity patterns across race, language, ability, income, or geography?
- Are we inviting participants or community partners to co-interpret or sense-make the data with us?
- Are we acknowledging limitations of the data and areas where our understanding is incomplete?

¹ Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont, *Guiding Principles*. Vermont Agency of Education, 2025. [Future of Ed Guiding Principles_0.pdf](#)

² Race Forward, *Racial Justice Impact Assessment* (version 5), accessed August 14, 2025, https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/RacialJusticeImpactAssessment_v5.pdf.

³ State of Vermont Office of Racial Equity. *Equity Impact Assessment Tool*. <https://racialequity.vermont.gov/sites/reap/files/documents/Impact%20Assessment%20-%20Template.pdf>

⁴ Race Forward, “Implicit Racial Bias / Unconscious Bias,” in *What Is Racial Equity?*, Race Forward, accessed August 17 2025

⁵ *Chicago United for Equity. Racial Equity Impact Assessment: CDOT – Chicago Complete Streets: North Milwaukee Avenue Project. Authored in partnership with Logan Square Neighborhood Association and Latin United Community Housing Association, 2018. This model illustrates how the “sphere of impact” (direct, secondary, community levels) is operationalized in practice through equity-centered infrastructure planning.*

https://www.chicagounitedforequity.org/files/ugd/05f795_b7ee53bb4c9f4249b530b511edf93e64.pdf.

⁶ Rosa González (Facilitating Power), *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership*, 2020, accessed August 13, 2025, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/facilitatingpower/pages/53/attachments/original/1596746165/CE2O_SPECTRUM_2020.pdf?1596746165. This tool, developed by González, illustrates a progression from marginalization toward community ownership through participatory stages—inform, consult, involve, collaborate, defer to impact—making it a foundational model for mapping levels of community engagement.

⁷ Institute for Community Solutions. *Using Asset-Based Language Over Deficit-Based Language*. <https://www.icsequity.org/asset-based-language-over-deficit-based-language>

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Resources & Style Guides for Framing Health Equity & Avoiding Stigmatizing Language*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Health_Equity_Language.html

⁹ Vermont.gov. “Accessibility.” *State of Vermont*. Accessed August 22, 2025. <https://vermont.gov/accessibility>