



State of Vermont
Vermont Department of Education
120 State Street
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To: Vermonters
From: Tom James, State Board of Education Chair
Richard H. Cate, Commissioner
Date: October 10, 2007
Re: The Future of Education in Vermont

We are writing to announce the beginning of a public engagement process about the future of education in Vermont. The State Board of Education and Department of Education staff are asking for your assistance and inviting you to participate in this process. The attached document represents a starting point for this conversation. This description of a desired state of education represents our work over the past few months, including the public input received at the September State Board meeting. Although we have worked hard to clearly articulate a vision for the desired state of education, we view this document as the starting point for a conversation with a wide range of people. We are seeking your input so that we can eventually develop a desired state document that reflects the consensus opinion of Vermonters.

We need to stress that, for the next several months, we want to frame a conversation about the desired components of a transformed education system. The discussion about how we should get there will come later. In this document, we used the term *transformation* when describing what we want to accomplish because it is important that we recognize all of the good work that is ongoing in our education system. Yet we believe that, in order to adequately prepare our children for the world that awaits them, we must make some significant changes to that system.

The staff of the Department of Education participated this week in facilitated small group discussions about this topic. Much of the time on the next few State Board agendas will be dedicated to similar conversations between State Board members, Department staff and representatives of various constituent groups. The first of these meetings will occur on October 16th, first with a group of students and then with a group of parents. Future meetings will include teachers, superintendents, principals, school board members, legislators and other political leaders, representatives of the business community and other constituent groups. We are also planning a multi-day summit to which representatives of all of these groups will be invited. Commissioner Cate will also be conducting regional meetings with students around the state. This public engagement process will evolve beyond what we have described as we proceed throughout the year.

We hope that many of you will join us in this effort as we focus our efforts on strategies to help all students to be successful. Thank you.

***How Are the Children?
A Step toward the Transformation of Education in Vermont***

The question, “*And how are the children?*” is one that every society should ask itself. However, it is the warriors of the Masai Tribe on the distant plains of East Africa that are said to use these words as their traditional greeting. The Masai’s hoped-for response to the question is, “*All the children are well.*”

The question before the Vermont State Board of Education is: “*How can our educational system best meet the needs of the children?*” The State Board and Department of Education vision currently calls for: “...high skills, creative thinking, and love of knowledge and learning for every student while ensuring student achievement in a safe and healthy learning environment.” This vision statement could be a good descriptor of educational wellness, but the State Board believes that it is time to move beyond this vision to a plan for transforming Vermont’s education system. Vermont’s education system has a lengthy history of accomplishments of which we can all be proud. Our state has long valued the importance of education as a key component of the success of our children. Yet as we observe changes in our world such as the advancement of technology, our global society, shifts in needed job skills, changing demographics and information access, it is clear we need to transform our education system so our children will be prepared for the world that awaits them. We believe that we need to look beyond the walls of our schools to create a 21st Century Learning Environment. Our public and independent schools play a vital role as learning environments but learning also takes place in children’s homes and in many other places in our communities. Therefore, we will use the term “learning environments” throughout this document to more inclusively describe our schools together with the other environments in which our children learn.

If we are to be successful in transforming our education system, the State Board believes that we must begin by creating a clear definition of the desired state of this system. The State Board has identified five components of a desired state for the purpose of generating a statewide dialogue. These components are:

- Student-centered Education
- Leadership in a Student-centered Learning Environment
- Flexible Learning Environments
- Engaged Community Partners
- Results and Indicators of Success

While the State Board believes these components reflect the necessary elements of a desired education system, it recognizes that once there is agreement on the desired state, the real work will begin. The process of creating a successful implementation plan, including the necessary structure and resources, will require thoughtful engagement by all involved. The State Board and the commissioner will seek to engage all interested stakeholders in a dialogue about the future of education in Vermont. The State Board will use the five components and this input as a framework for the transformation to a 21st century education system, building upon the past accomplishments and contributions of many that have led to the successful practices in place today.

A Framework for Transforming Schools into 21st Century Learning Environments

Student-centered Education

- a) The education of each student will be guided by an appropriate Individual Learning Plan (ILP).
- b) Students will actively participate in designing their own ILP and have responsibility for accomplishing the plan.
- c) Student and parent voices will be listened to and their ideas and experiences will be incorporated in designs for learning.
- d) No two students are the same, and the best way to learn may vary from one to another. Instruction and learning opportunities will recognize and appreciate individual differences in learning styles, culture and value systems along with the unique skills, talents and interests of students.
- e) Learning environments will provide a variety of pathways for students to achieve success, and will provide multiple opportunities as necessary for students to find their best path.
- f) Schools will use Vermont's Standards and Grade Expectations and 21st Century Skills as the core structure for learning, which will create the opportunity to assess students based on their competence or performance. Student progress will be based on assessments of competency, and the timeframe in which learning takes place will no longer be a measure.
- g) We are immersed in an information-based society. Learning environments will take advantage of technologies to leverage the "anytime, anywhere" access to resources now possible in order to truly provide students with a learning environment unrestricted by time or location. These same tools will help revolutionize the work of educators, putting them in touch with the world and improving productivity in ways we could not imagine just a few years ago.
- h) Teacher preparation and other relevant higher education programs will be modified in accordance with universal guiding principles so that teachers and other facilitators of learning will be successful in creating student-centered learning environments.

Leadership in a Student-centered Learning Environment

- a) Leaders will set clear and accountable expectations to implement and sustain student-centered learning environments.
- b) Leadership will allocate resources in a way that will support desired learning results.
- c) Leaders will understand and appreciate student-centered learning and the role of parents in students' education.
- d) Leaders will assist in the development of new leaders in the learning environment.
- e) Teachers and others knowledgeable in content, child development and technology will be leaders in facilitating learning for each and every student.

Flexible Learning Environments

- a) Learning environments will provide the necessary structure and flexibility for the success of students.
- b) The pace of learning will be guided by ILPs and Vermont's Standards and Grade Expectations as indicators of success.
- c) Every student will be provided with caring and supportive relationships.

- d) Students will be provided with resources (technology) for thinking, assessing and constructing their own meaning from the information (data) they gather, and creating new knowledge.
- e) With the transformation to an information-based society, and with an unregulated Internet, anyone can publish information and make it available to the world. Students will develop the ability to discern the appropriate from the inappropriate, validate what they learn, understand the concepts of intellectual property, and apply ethics to their decisions.

Engaged Community Partners

While adults tend to associate the word *community* with a geographic location, research has shown that young people now define *community* as a ¹“digital place of common interest.” This definition may explain why online social networking is so common among young people. As we envision and create new learning environments for students, we need to keep this expanding definition for *community* in mind.

Learning environments will be places where:

- a) Parents are encouraged to be meaningfully participating in their children’s learning.
- b) Community members are invested in the outcomes of learning organizations.
- c) Members of the professional and business community serve as resources to help the educational community to understand the skills, talents and ethics that future workers need to be successful.

Results and Indicators of Success

- a) Students will graduate from places of learning with the ability to continue their education; to live and work as contributing citizens in diverse and global communities; and to acquire 21st century skills.
- b) Parents, teachers, principals and all staff will model lifelong learning.

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Our world is changing and we must prepare today’s students for lives, jobs and careers - many of which do not exist today - in a world of rapid change. While the State Board of Education is committed to promoting policy that reflects a challenging and relevant educational system, it recognizes that successful relationships between and among students, parents and educators are essential to student achievement. Transforming the culture and attitudes within our schools and toward our schools is also essential if Vermont is to ensure that all of our children acquire the skills and content knowledge required for 21st century success.

The State Board of Education looks forward to using this document as a framework for conversation with the educators, students, parents, community members, the higher education community, businesses and policy makers for the purpose of defining a “desired state” by the end of March 2008. This effort will focus on defining *what* we want to accomplish and a conversation about *how* to get there will come later. This work will be linked to the upcoming process of updating the State Board and Department of Education strategic plan, which is due to be completed by May 2009.

¹ http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/plan/2004/site/docs_and_pdf/NETP2005.ppt
National Educational Technology Plan: Susan D. Patrick, Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education, 2004