

What Educators Have to Say About Student Success – Vermont-NEA’s Proposals for Vermont’s Local Public Schools

A lot is being said these days about Vermont’s schools – what they cost, how they are governed, what teachers teach and what students learn. Indeed, there is no shortage of opinions from all corners of the state.

We know that school boards, state agencies, politicians and chambers of commerce are committed to outstanding local public schools. But nobody is more dedicated to our schools than the men and women in the state’s classrooms everyday – Vermont-NEA members. They are the professionals who work with Vermont’s students, helping them learn, grow and prosper. It is only natural that when it comes to education – when it comes to how we can best serve Vermont’s future – our state’s educators know what works, what doesn’t and what needs to be improved.

With that in mind, Vermont-NEA members are pledging to ensure student success.

Earlier this year, the governor’s office, the Agency of Education and Vermont-NEA asked every public school educator about the teaching and learning conditions in their schools through the TELL Vermont Survey. The results were clear: educators want public schools that give them the time, the resources and the responsibility to get the very best out of every student.

Together with our communities, Vermont-NEA members are leading the charge in making our already great public schools even better, equipping our students with the tools they need to live happy, productive, fulfilling lives, no matter what path they choose to pursue.

We will ensure student success by:

- Embracing rigorous standards that still allow us the freedom to teach in the ways that are most effective for all of our students
- Recruiting more of the best and brightest to join us in this profession
- Inviting and encouraging effective, rigorous and fair evaluation of our work, so that we and the entire school community can focus our efforts where it matters: on student growth
- Adopting common-sense reforms in how the profession is regulated
- Expanding the ability of local educators and local school boards to come up with innovative, community-specific programs that will help local students thrive
- Collaborating with businesses in our communities in recognition that our public schools are our most important economic development tool
- Working with advocates, parents, and social service providers to address the effects of poverty in our schools

Vermont-NEA members have been in the front of Vermont's classrooms for decades – and we are suited to be at the forefront of the profession. Just as doctors are called upon to elevate medicine and lawyers are consulted on how best to raise the standards of their profession, teachers are the place to start when discussing how we can make education work for every student.

Vermont-NEA members will be making a series of proposals – in the legislature, at the State Board of Education, and in the Agency of Education – that we believe pave a path toward even greater educational excellence.

We don't pretend to know how to run a business, perform surgery or even build a building (although we teach future business leaders, doctors and engineers). But we do know how to teach, we know how children learn, and we know – because we are highly trained professionals dedicated to our craft – there is room for improvement in even the best of systems.

The noted public education analyst Diane Ravitch recently praised the state's approach to public education:

What's so great about Vermont? Aside from gorgeous scenery, a beautiful climate, and friendly people, it is a state where people have a powerful sense of community. They care about their local community, about their children, about their state. They don't brag, though they could: Vermont has the nation's highest graduation rate (91.4 percent). Instead, they write and talk and think about how to do better. They want more parental involvement, more early childhood education, more technology in every classroom. They want to support their principals and teachers, and they want everyone to remember that the whole community must work together on behalf of its youngest members.

The members of Vermont-NEA are proud to be a part of our state's public schools, and we agree that all of us need to work together on behalf of our students. Join us as we celebrate our profession – and ensure that our local public schools so that they remain the state's most important resource.

We embrace rigorous standards that still allow us the freedom to teach in the ways that are most effective for all of our students

Our members support rigorous standards that push all students to perform to the best of their ability. The Common Core – implemented properly – can give teachers the flexibility to adjust their curriculum to their classrooms while still ensuring all Vermont students leave high school with the skills that prepare them for college, career or further exploration.

Teachers, support professionals and parents all have an interest in seeing our students succeed. By embracing rigorous standards, educators can lead the charge toward an even better prepared student body, but only if these standards are more than just a pretext for a high-stakes, one-off testing regimen.

We will ensure student success with:

- Adequate training that gives teachers the tools they need to effectively implement the Common Core and other rigorous standards
- Flexibility so teachers can use their professional judgment in deciding what material they present to their students
- The creation of "student learning objectives" – and, again, the training needed to implement them correctly – reaching into the fuller curriculum to prepare students best for life and learning after high school

We must recruit more of the best and brightest to join us in this profession

More than half of educators leave the profession within five years. The reasons for such turnover are numerous, but relatively low starting pay, lack of quality mentoring, micromanagement of the school day and the absence of any regular, meaningful feedback and evaluation are among the main factors driving young professionals out of the classrooms.

Our children deserve the best teachers we can provide. Expected career earnings are not what they are in other professions, and that is a reason more young professionals turn elsewhere. But, for those who commit to teaching early, it is not why so many leave the profession within five years. The basic reasons they leave are their financial needs at that stage, they find teaching is too difficult without sufficient employer support, and they discover so much of a teacher's time is regimented.

We will ensure student success with the:

- Forgiveness of student loans for new teachers who enter the profession and remain Vermont teachers for more than five years
- Requirement of a full-year of student teaching rather than the standard 12 weeks now in place
- Elimination of the over-reliance on high-stakes standardized testing and the cultivation of a culture of innovation and flexibility
- Implementation of a two-year, high-caliber mentoring process for new teachers
- Resistance to one-size-fits-all sets of teaching parameters, allowing local schools and communities space to innovate

We invite and accept effective, rigorous and fair evaluation of our work, so that we and the entire school community can focus our efforts where it matters: on student achievement

Contrary to some assertions, teachers and other education professionals welcome the evaluation of their work. For that evaluation to mean anything, however, it must be effective, rigorous, fair and predictable. For too many, evaluation schemes are limited to student scores on standardized tests. While testing is part of teaching – students take many tests and quizzes throughout the year so that teachers can measure their progress – it cannot be the sole basis of teacher evaluation. Vermont-NEA is already working with state education officials and practitioners on how to make regular, rigorous evaluation work, and how it can be used to improve teaching and learning.

We will ensure student success by:

- Instituting high caliber, collaborative evaluation of educators' work, conducted by individuals with adequate training and time
- Encouraging school administrators to embrace evaluation as a learning tool and a way to see what outstanding teachers are doing and using their practice and pedagogy as models; detecting shortfalls in good teachers and using that information to help them improve; and identifying teachers who are performing poorly and determining how best to ensure their swift improvement or, if unsuccessful, ensure their exit from the profession
- Preventing the over-simplification of the evaluation process by rejecting an overt reliance on standardized test scores as a key measure of teacher effectiveness

We urge adoption of common-sense reforms in how the profession is regulated

Every profession regulates itself. Standards for the teaching profession are developed by the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators, which is a part of the Agency of Education. This board is not independent of the state's Secretary of Education, and, unlike the other professions, is not overseen by the Secretary of State's office.

The current regulatory and relicensing framework for Vermont educators is too cumbersome, too time consuming, too arbitrary and too often ineffective.

We will ensure student success if we:

- Place the oversight of the profession under a truly independent professional board that is under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of State's office, where the Office of Professional Regulation already oversees other professions
- End the meaningless and ineffective Individual Professional Learning Plan process
- Ensure that professional standards and relicensing requirements make sense for the profession and for Vermont's students
- Simplify the overly complex and time-consuming process through which teachers are relicensed, so that it reduces unnecessary time away from teaching and focuses solely on an individual's qualifications to hold a professional license

We should expand the ability of local educators and local school boards to come up with innovative, community-specific programs that will help local students thrive

Vermont has a strong, vibrant tradition of local control of our schools. We also have the single most accountable public schools in the nation – every year, unlike in all but six other states, voters in local communities make decisions about the funding levels and needs of their own schools. Because this system of accountability is so ingrained in our culture, our local public schools can often be customized to serve the needs of our local communities.

We will ensure student success by:

- Expanding the scope of bargaining at the negotiating table to give teachers the right to negotiate over matters of actual education policy and other non-economic conditions
- Proposing model, pilot programs in communities that want to do things differently – and work on them together with administrators and parents
- Calling for support from state education officials of community-specific innovations that can foster even more student learning opportunities

We will collaborate with businesses in our communities in recognition that our public schools are our most important economic development tool

When business owners and their families make decisions of where to locate, the quality of the local public schools is often high on the list of issues. We know that thriving public schools enrich the community; provide a high-quality workforce; and are a key to a community's success. It makes sense, then, for all of us in public education – especially teachers and other educators – to seek out and foster relationships with our local business leaders so that, together, we can prepare Vermont's students for happy, fulfilling lives while at the same time improving the economic health of our cities and towns.

We will ensure student success if we:

- Create model, pilot programs where businesses support STEM education in our public schools
- Seek business support for specific programs
- Work with statewide business groups in developing partnerships in schools
- Establish and celebrate the link between great public schools and economic development, and work with businesses to focus on improving the economy through growth and innovation, not cost-cutting and stagnation

We have to work with advocates, parents, and social service providers to address the effects of poverty in our schools

Year after year, the same story emerges from the results of standardized tests: Vermonters perform better than just about anyone else in the US when it comes to reading, math, science and writing. But that masks a fundamental problem marring education here and across the United States: While students from stable, middle-class homes reach achievement levels that are among the highest in the developed world, students from poor households record noticeably lower scores. The achievement gap is well-known and well-documented. But we need to move beyond acknowledging that many poorer students start off and stay behind their better-off peers – we need to do something about it. All students deserve a roof over their heads, food in their bellies and security in their daily lives.

We can ensure student success if we:

- Support efforts to make housing available to all students and their parents, recognizing that lack of consistent shelter makes it difficult to succeed at school.
- Continue expansion of free meals in our public schools, recognizing that students who are hungry are not able to learn as effectively
- Encourage efforts to make hard work pay, so that our working poor can earn enough money to provide shelter, food and safety for themselves and their families, recognizing that students who are concerned about where they will sleep, where their next meal is from or whether they will be safe when they leave school aren't able to focus on their studies