

EDUCATION

EDUCATION CHALLENGES

Introduction

1. Progress Report on the Education Challenges Plan of Implementation

A committee composed of a teacher, school board member, high school principal, supervisory union business manager, a superintendent, a technical center director, special education director, a State Board of Education member and a person from the private sector was formed and met six times with the Education Commissioner Armando Vilaseca, Bill Talbott and Tom Evslin to develop ideas for meeting the two challenges and six outcomes as stated in Act 68 of 2010, Section 6. The pros and cons of the ideas discussed at these meetings are the basis for this plan. While the complete discussion has informed my decisions, these recommendations are mine. I also include two other options as alternatives.

Status Report of the Plan

Act 68 of 2010 has fiscal challenges for FY 2011 and FY 2012. Given that school budgets adopted this past town meeting for FY 2011 were \$22,000,000 below “the 2009 estimates of fiscal year 2011 education spending used to determine property tax rate adjustments under 32 V.S.A. § 5402b” I am concluding that the FY 2011 fiscal challenge have been met. If my conclusion is not accepted we have estimated that \$3.5 million of the savings in the adopted budgets can be attributed to administration. This leaves a remaining amount of \$9.8 million to be reduced from the FY 2011. Given that budgets have already been adopted by the voters these savings could be made by assigning further reductions district by district using an allocation method sensitive to those districts that have been reducing costs or seen fewer spending increases. The rest of this status report refers to meeting the outcomes and the FY 2012 fiscal challenges.

General Education

The major driver of administration costs in the current system is the 307 schools in 280 schools districts administered through 58 supervisory unions and districts (two others are interstate school districts). Department staff point out that the cost of administration is mostly driven by the number of entities that need to be administered and less by the number of students. The most direct way to reduce administration costs is to reduce the demand for administration by reducing the number of entities needing administration. Ultimately, significantly reducing any costs in Vermont’s education system means reducing staff because at least 80 percent of the total cost of education comes from staff salaries and benefits. My proposal is as follows:

1. Merge the member districts of the 46 supervisory unions into supervisory districts by school year 2012-2013 so that the total number of supervisory districts (including the 12 already in existence) in the state is no more than 50. These districts averaging some 1800 pupils will be larger than what we are accustomed to but will still be small.

2. Establish minimum student-to-staff ratios in Year 1 at 4.75:1 (currently at 4.55:1) and 4.95:1 in Year 2. “Staff” refers to all staff employed by school districts and supervisory unions. “Pupils” refer to the full-time equivalent enrollment of the public schools. School districts should take advantage of attrition as much as possible to achieve the higher ratios. Even with the increased student-to-staff ratio proposed Vermont will still be among the fewest student-per-adult ratio of any state and, by national standards, our schools and districts will still be small. Arguably, our larger schools and districts will not lose the value of small size. They will be in a structure that gives the benefits of relatively small size complemented by at least some economies of scale.
3. Create a commission to review the viability of schools with enrollment of fewer than 75 students considering issues such as geographic isolation and the capacity of any surrounding schools. The purpose of the commission would be to identify small schools that should remain open.

I believe this plan will serve to reduce costs as well as increase learning opportunities leading to the desired outcomes for students. Simply put, smaller districts have fewer options financially and programmatically, larger districts have more.

Vermont’s 246 towns are served by over 280 school boards, with over 1,480 members, for approximately 92,000 students. Substantially reducing the number of school districts, and in turn boards, will provide consistent, high-quality opportunities to students. There is no magic number of school districts. However, they would have to be large enough to expand school choice for students, reduce the administrative inefficiencies we currently experience and economize the school staff.

In a more streamlined administrative structure, opportunities not currently available to our students and families could be realized. If there were more schools within each educational district, districts could offer options based on the interest and needs of individual students and families.

Middle and high schools could offer different options for students in order to attain their diploma. These schools could offer specialties in particular areas, while still providing the liberal arts education our public schools have traditionally provided. Schools could offer students the opportunity to do semester-long internships while still attending their school of choice. Not all high schools would operate this way, as our current structure serves many students well. However, for those capable students who do not reach their potential currently, these schools would offer an alternative. Schools partnering with private business could provide workforce development, internships, job shadowing or other forms of real-life learning that could be enhanced by such a model.

Schools could expand their offerings to concentrate on having a richer curriculum in specific topics, while their neighboring school may have a different focus. This type of “magnet” school concept could allow for one school to have a focus on arts/humanities while another school in their district could concentrate on math/science/technology. The

convergence of theory and application could be accomplished, as schools would not be expected to offer everything to everyone because students/parents would have a choice in their education.

Special Education

Special education is part of Vermont's education system offered by school districts and is not a separate system. The plan for meeting the two outcomes referring to students who have or may have special needs (numbers 5 & 6) listed below must be taken as a whole. For example, Item 1, providing a block grant for special education funding, will not work if districts remain small and are not merged and the other four components are not implemented.

The timeline for this plan has yet to be established. One gauge of the process is to consider that the department has been working with schools to implement the Response to Intervention for three years reaching about one-third of the schools.

1. Institute a block grant for special education based on ADM with a weighted system regarding individual student services to determine required allocation.
 - a. A separate process for residential students would need to be created.
 - b. Continue current process for state-placed students.
 - c. Continue process for unexpected and unusual cost requests.
 - d. Create a statewide limit on what schools can pay for an hourly rate for related service providers and daily rates for outside placements in day school programs. (The remainder cannot fall to the local budget.)
2. Require a specific team process to determine the need for paraeducator services. When a paraeducator is necessary, require a fading plan in the IEP.
3. Increase implementation of co-teaching through Education Service Areas (ESA) using reinvestment funds.
4. Require all schools to implement Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, Differentiated Instruction and Response to Intervention.
 - a. Training would be facilitated through ESAs using reinvestment funds.
 - b. All educators and administrators would be required to participate in the training.
5. Require a specific process/protocol for all service decisions at an IEP meeting with required training annually of all individuals serving in the role of the Local Education Agency at team meetings.

Option 2

If the proposal above is not accepted the fiscal challenge in FY 2012 can be met by establishing minimum student-to-staff ratios to take effect in FY 2012 at 4.95:1 (currently at 4.55:1). “Staff” refers to all staff employed by school districts and supervisory unions. “Pupils” refer to the full-time equivalent enrollment of the public schools.

Option 3

If Option 2 is not accepted the fiscal challenges in FY 2012 can still be met by allocating to each school district a mandatory reduction amount so that its FY 2012 education spending will be lower than its FY 2011 education spending by that amount. Leave to the local boards and administrators to determine the manner in which those cuts should occur.

2. Needed Changes to Laws and Regulations

In order to meet the challenges outlined above, session law with a limited life of three years that overrides current law and permits the commissioner to organize the new district configuration would need to be created. Once accomplished a proper review of Title 16 can be made so that statutes can be amended or repealed as required.

Suggested language for session law

Sec. xx. Merging School Districts

- a. Notwithstanding any law to the contrary, the commissioner of education in consultation with the State Board of Education’s Policy Commission on Redistricting shall reorganize the current school districts so that each supervisory union comprises no more than one district. The commissioner shall also review all existing and new supervisory districts and merge smaller ones so that the total number is no greater than 50. Each new district shall be organized so that each member town is proportionally represented in the new district board either in number or by means of weighted voting.

- b. The commissioner shall establish a timeline so that boards of school directors for the new districts can be elected before the school year beginning on July 1, 2011. That year shall be used for planning the operation and staffing of the new district, preparing a budget for the ensuing year and presenting it to the voters on Town meeting day in 2012. Each new district shall begin providing for the education of its pupils for the 2012 – 2013 school year.

- c. A commission is established composed of xxxxx to examine the viability of each school operating with an enrollment in FY2010 of fewer than 75 students. In determining viability the commission shall consider the geographic isolation of the school and the capacity of the surrounding schools to accept more students. Upon completion of its review the commission shall determine which schools shall be closed and present this list to the Legislature on January 15, 2012.

d. The commissioner shall review all pertinent statutes regarding the organization and governance of school districts and recommend to the Legislature necessary changes resulting from this reorganization.

3. System to Measure the Success for Meeting Challenges and Achieving Outcomes

Outcomes measures under the Act are to be “simple, objective, consistent, and based on data that are currently collected or could easily be collected.”

(1) Increase electronic and distance learning opportunities that enhance learning, increase productivity, and promote creativity.

This is more of a “how” or way to achieve the outcomes than an outcome itself. By the end of this month the Learning Network of Vermont will be up and running in 90 schools across the state. This system allows students to use internet video to engage in learning experiences from anywhere in the world. To increase the capacity of this type of system high-quality broadband access must be delivered to each school. Work is currently under way using Stimulus funds toward this end. We also have many schools without LNV that are taking part in Scopia desktop trainings which include Webcam connections, sharing of desktop content and connecting to LNV cameras. Ninety-nine percent of schools do have some form of broadband, however, the quality differs greatly throughout the state.

In addition, we are exploring ways to partner with New Hampshire to combine our two states’ initiatives on virtual high schools.

(2) Increase the secondary school graduation rates for all students.

Sec. 44 of Act 44 of 2009 established a goal for all secondary schools in Vermont to achieve a completion rate of 100 percent by 2020. Each year the department publishes the high school completion rate for each school so that the attainment of this goal can be tracked. Two measures are used: 1. the event rate or the percentage of seniors who graduate and 2. a cohort rate or the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate in four years. The cohort rate is now the standard measure across the nation.

(3) Increase the aspiration, continuation, and completion rates for all students in connection with postsecondary education and training.

Beginning this year (FY 2010) the department has subscribed to the data service of the National Student Clearing House. The Clearing House has a post-secondary database of all students attending post-secondary institutions eligible to receive federal aid. This would include trade schools as well as four-year higher education institutions. With this student-level data we will be able to track graduated seniors who are attending one of the institutions in the Clearing House database. FY 2010 will be the first year we have these data and this year can be used to establish the baseline. I propose achieving this outcome in the same way the graduation rate outcome is proposed. By 2020, 100 percent of high school graduates will be attending a post-secondary institution.

(4) Increase administrative efficiencies within education governance in a manner that promotes student achievement.

This outcome will be achieved when school districts have merged into no more than 50 supervisory districts. This will provide opportunities for increasing administrative efficiency because fewer governance units will need to be administered. This will also improve student outcomes and increase equal educational opportunities because larger districts will have more choices to offer students and more opportunities to effectively use limited staff.

(5) Increase cost-effectiveness in delivery of support services for students with individualized education plans.

(6) Increase the use of early intervention strategies that enable students to be successful in the general education environment and help avoid the later need for more expensive interventions.

Outcomes 5 and 6 will be measured by a reduction of the number of paraprofessionals needed and the number of referrals for special education services, as well as a decline in the special education child count.