Motivated but Incremental: Why Change Efforts Stall, and What Vermont Can Do Differently

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CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

ASU Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation
Arizona State University

Today's Speakers



Michael Berardino
Senior Research Analyst, CRPE



Lynn Cota
Superintendent, Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union



Bill Kimball
Superintendent, Maple Run Unified School District



Sherry Sousa
Superintendent, Mountain Views Supervisory Union



Today's Session

- CRPE's Research Overview
- Panel Discussion with three Vermont Superintendents
- Audience Q & A
- Applied Close

98%

of New England superintendents report feeling personally motivated to lead transformational change in their school districts.

Out of 298 superintendents responding to the survey question: "I feel personally motivated to lead transformational change in my district." (Definitely true, Mostly true, Mostly false, Definitely false)





CRPE's Working Definition of Transformational Systems Change

Transformational systems change happens when school districts **redefine their purpose and operations** through a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.

More than adopting new programs or policies, **it requires the fundamental redesign of core systems** (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing), **as well as people's roles** in classrooms, schools, and central offices, all aligned to a clear instructional vision. This often involves challenging long-held assumptions (e.g., one teacher per classroom, ability tracking), shifting mindsets (e.g., holding high expectations for every student), redistributing power (e.g., equipping students, families, and educators as decision-makers), and prioritizing equity (e.g., confronting racism and classism).

Transformational change is built to last, persisting through leadership transitions and reflecting a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence.

Last revised 8/1/25 for CRPE's New England District Transformation study

School districts are under increasing strain.



Methods and Data

RQ1: To what extent are school district leaders pursuing transformational change in their districts?

RQ2: What shapes leaders' decisions about which changes to pursue?



Survey

with 307 superintendents responding* from across all 6 New England states

*34.8% response rate



Artifact Interviews

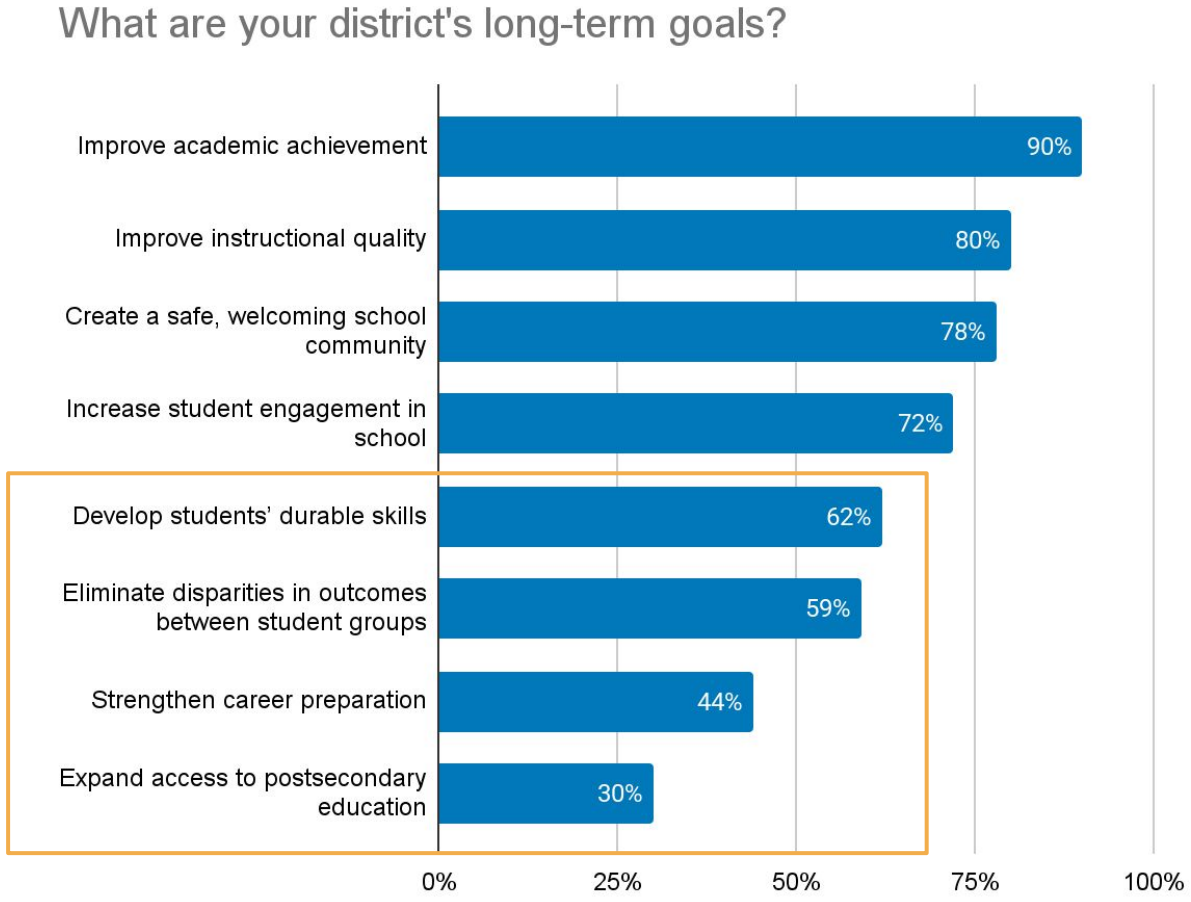
with 47 superintendents in districts that have published "vision" documents.

Findings

1

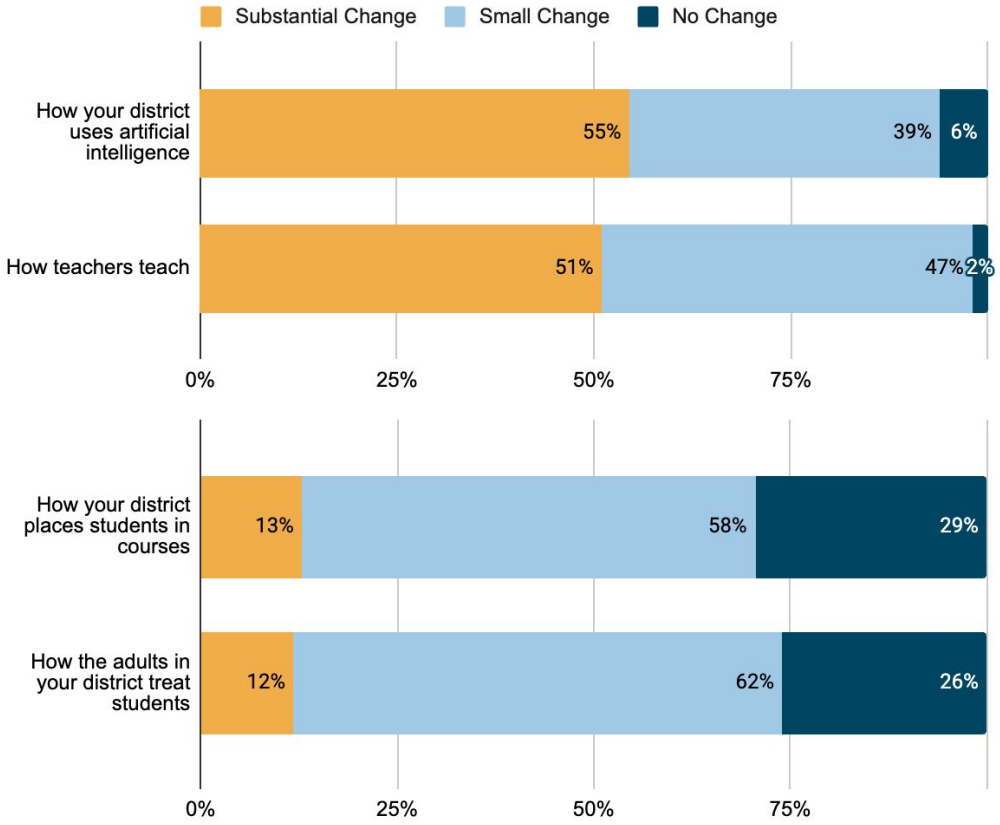
The need for transformational systems change is contested among superintendents. New England superintendents believe their districts need to change, but **they diverge on which long-term goals matter and whether achieving them requires fundamentally redesigning how districts work.** Leaders lack a shared understanding of what transformational change entails.

Most districts are focusing on traditional goals for schooling



Superintendents disagree about how much change is necessary in different domains of district work.

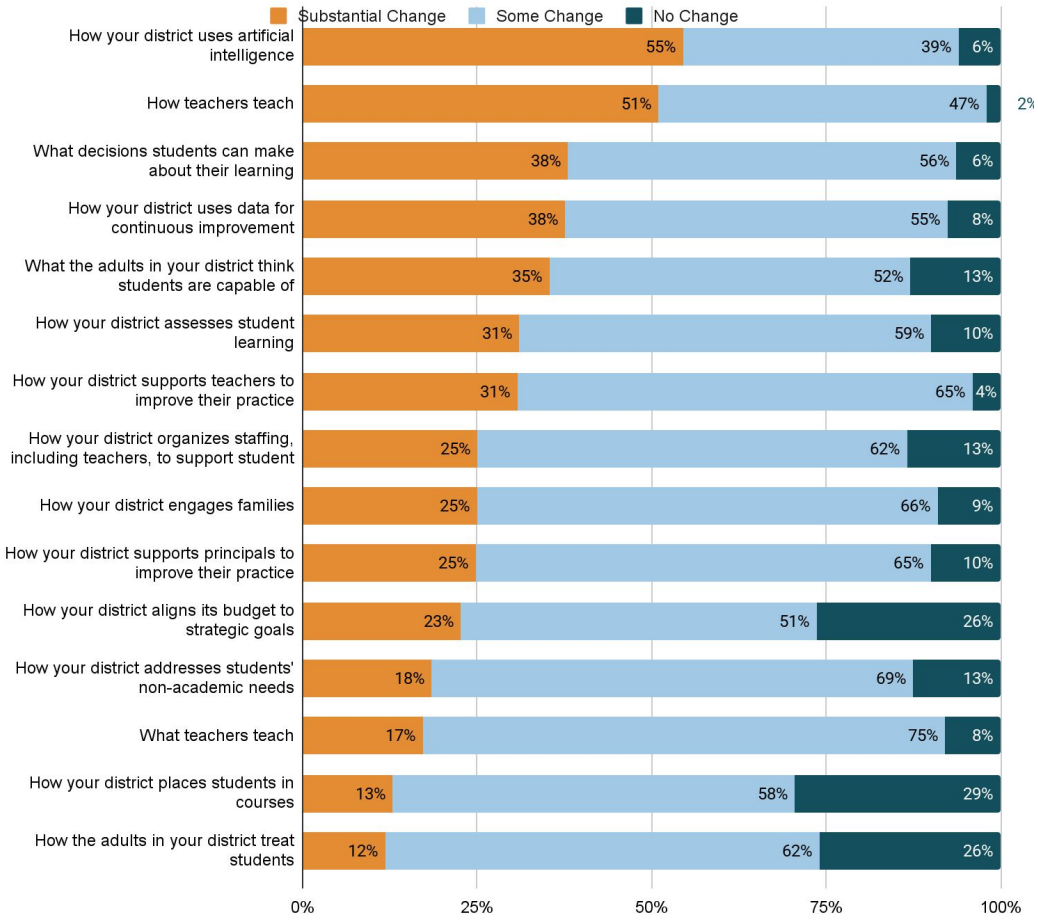
To achieve your district's long-term goals, how much change is needed in the following areas?



Most superintendents think a range of **small** and **substantial changes are needed** to achieve districts' long-term goals.

At the same time, notable minorities of superintendents believe **"no change" is needed in key areas**.

In order to achieve your district's long-term goals, how much change is needed in the following areas?

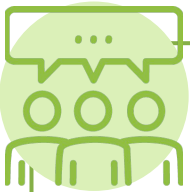


Findings

2

Transformational change efforts are rare in practice. Most change efforts focus on strengthening current systems rather than redesigning them. Where superintendents are trying to shift the purpose of schooling and redesign district systems, their efforts are often limited or in early stages.

What do districts say about their ambitious work?



Survey

When asked about their most ambitious change effort, superintendents frequently described **one** of the following:

- Curriculum revamping and alignment
- Pedagogical shifts
- Strengthening Tier 1 instruction
- Teacher PD and evaluation
- Data-driven instruction
- Differentiation and responsive intervention



Artifact Interviews

Many of the superintendents we interviewed described **aspirational visions for radical changes** to schooling and district systems.

In practice, most were **working strategically within existing structures** rather than fundamentally redesigning them.

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The changes leaders pursue are shaped by:

3

What they have seen: While superintendents value their personal networks for accessing ideas and information, **they did not describe frequent, systematized exposure to alternative models.**

"We get **stuck in our world, in our classroom,** and we forget there are so many resources and good stuff."



The changes leaders pursue are shaped by:

4

What they believe is the highest priority: Even superintendents aspiring toward transformational change prioritize work to stabilize district operations and improve instructional basics, which **consumes their capacity.**

One superintendent said that on good day, **just 20% of his attention goes to his district's strategic priorities.** The rest is what he called **"the whirlwind."**



The changes leaders pursue are shaped by:

5

What they can make tolerable for their most influential stakeholders: Without more politically sophisticated strategies, superintendents struggle to reconcile competing stakeholder interests, **resulting in a balance that favors the status quo.**

"**You can't just ram things down people's throats.** The next thing you know, the leader is gone, the change has been reversed."

Implications

Developing the conditions that enable ambitious leadership requires fundamental shifts in:



How leaders are prepared



How leaders spend their time



How leaders understand their roles



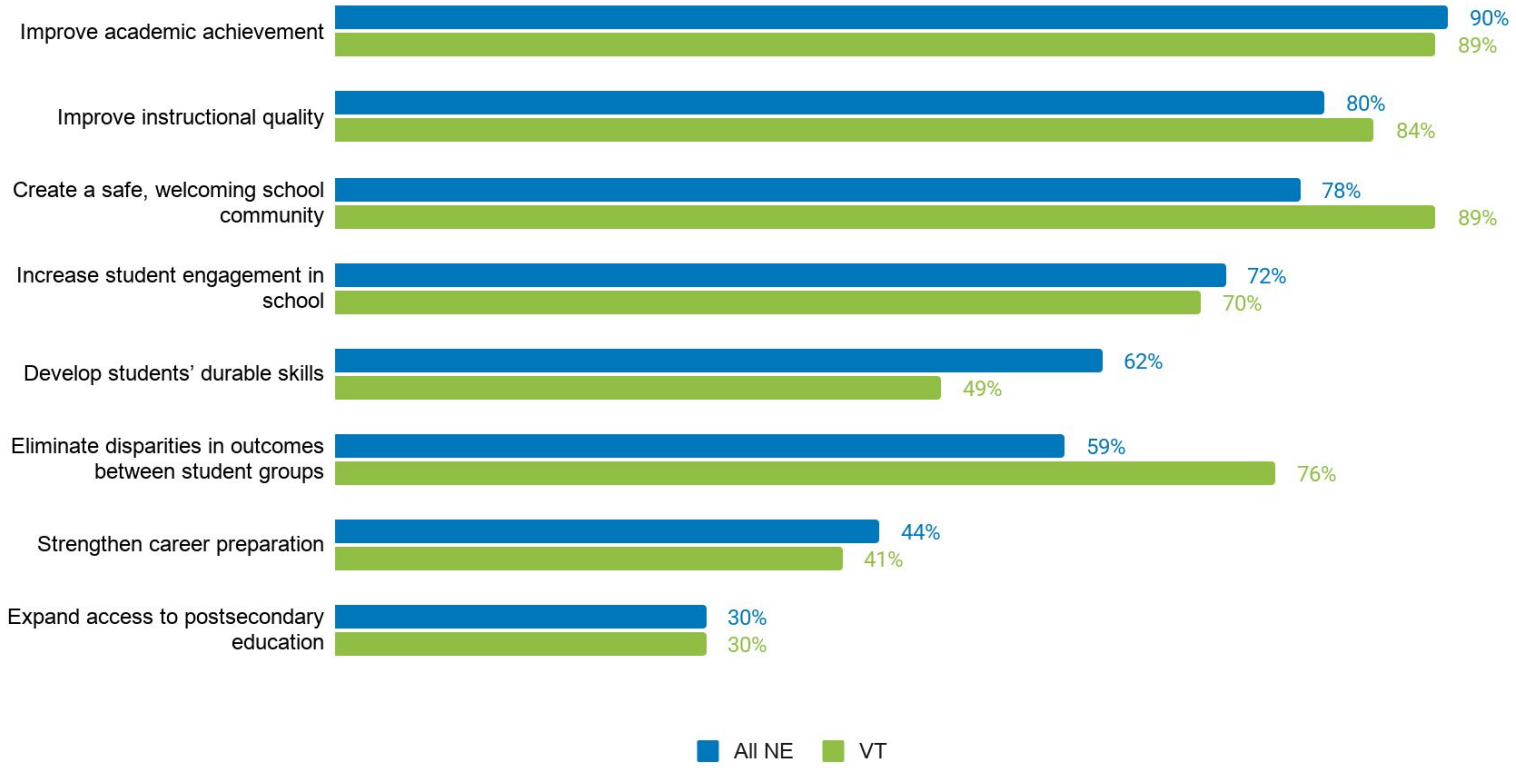
How leaders build and engage support

Sharing the story in Vermont

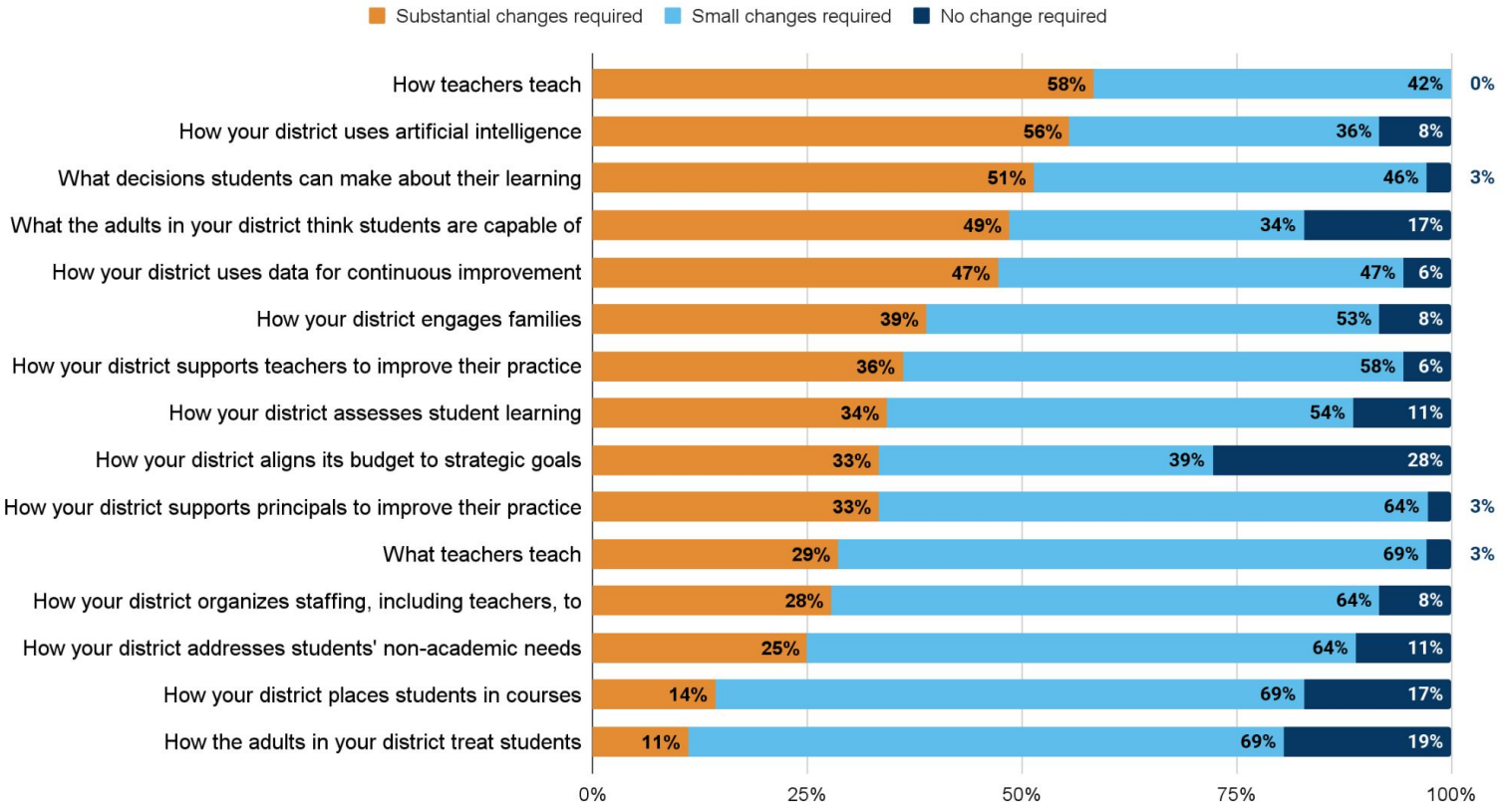
Pursuing change in Vermont

- **Motivation to Lead Transformational Change**: 92% of Superintendents in Vermont said they agree that they feel motivated to lead transformational change in their district, slightly lower than the region-wide average.
- **Goals**: Similar proportions, one big difference is “Eliminate disparities between students groups” where Vermont was 17 percentage points higher than region-wide
- **Substantial Change Needed**: In Vermont leaders said **5.4 domains** needed substantial change, the highest among all states.
    - What decisions students can make about their learning +13 pp
    - What adults think students are capable of +14 pp
    - How your district engages families +14 pp
- **Currently Working On**: In Vermont, leaders are currently working on an average of **3.1 of the domains** they said needs substantial change - again the highest among all states.
    - However, Vermont leaders are currently working on the **lowest proportion** of domains they said need substantial change.

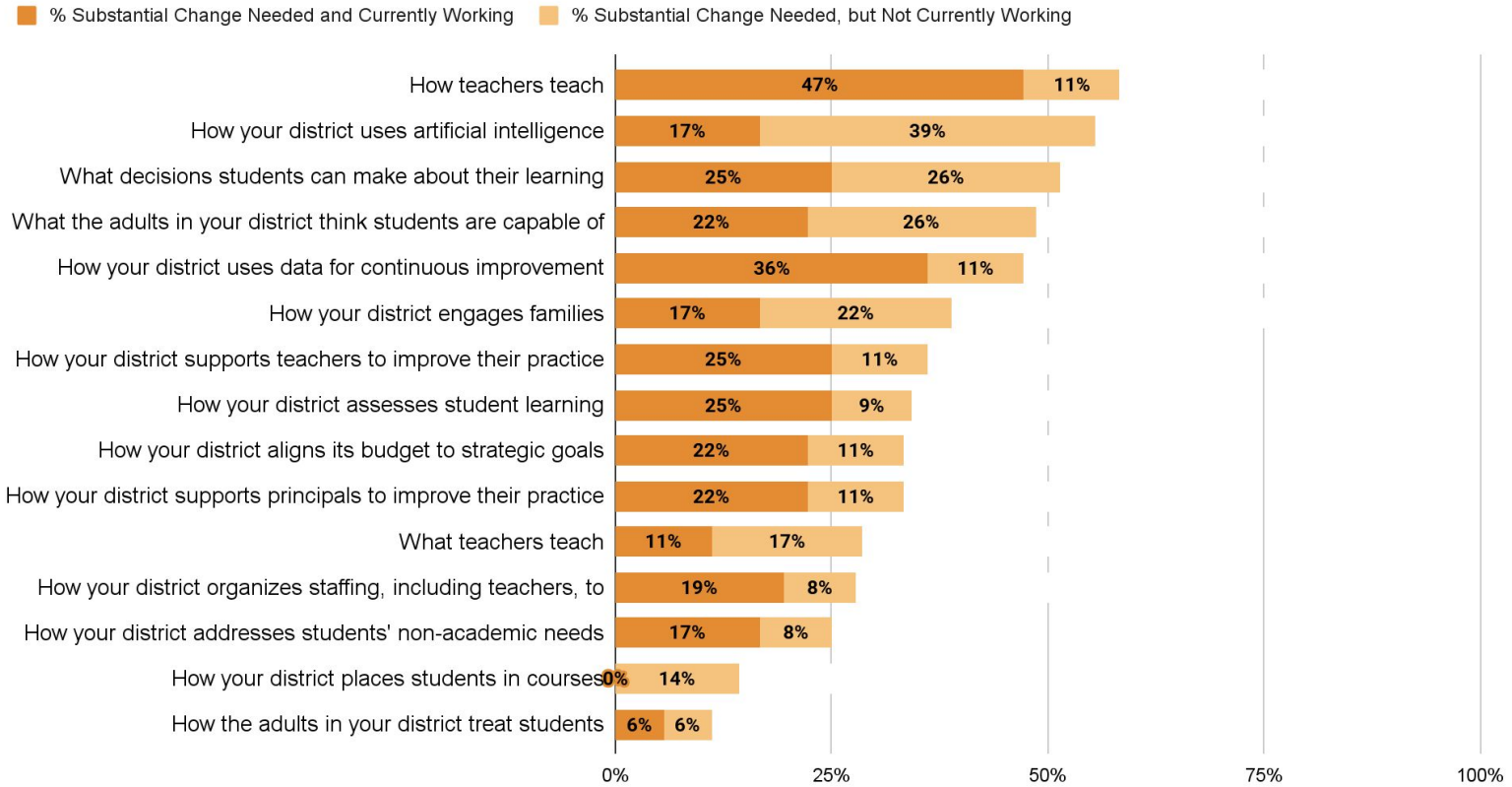
Long-Term Goals: Vermont as Compared to New England



What do superintendents think **needs to change in their districts** in order to achieve their long-term goals? Vermont Superintendents



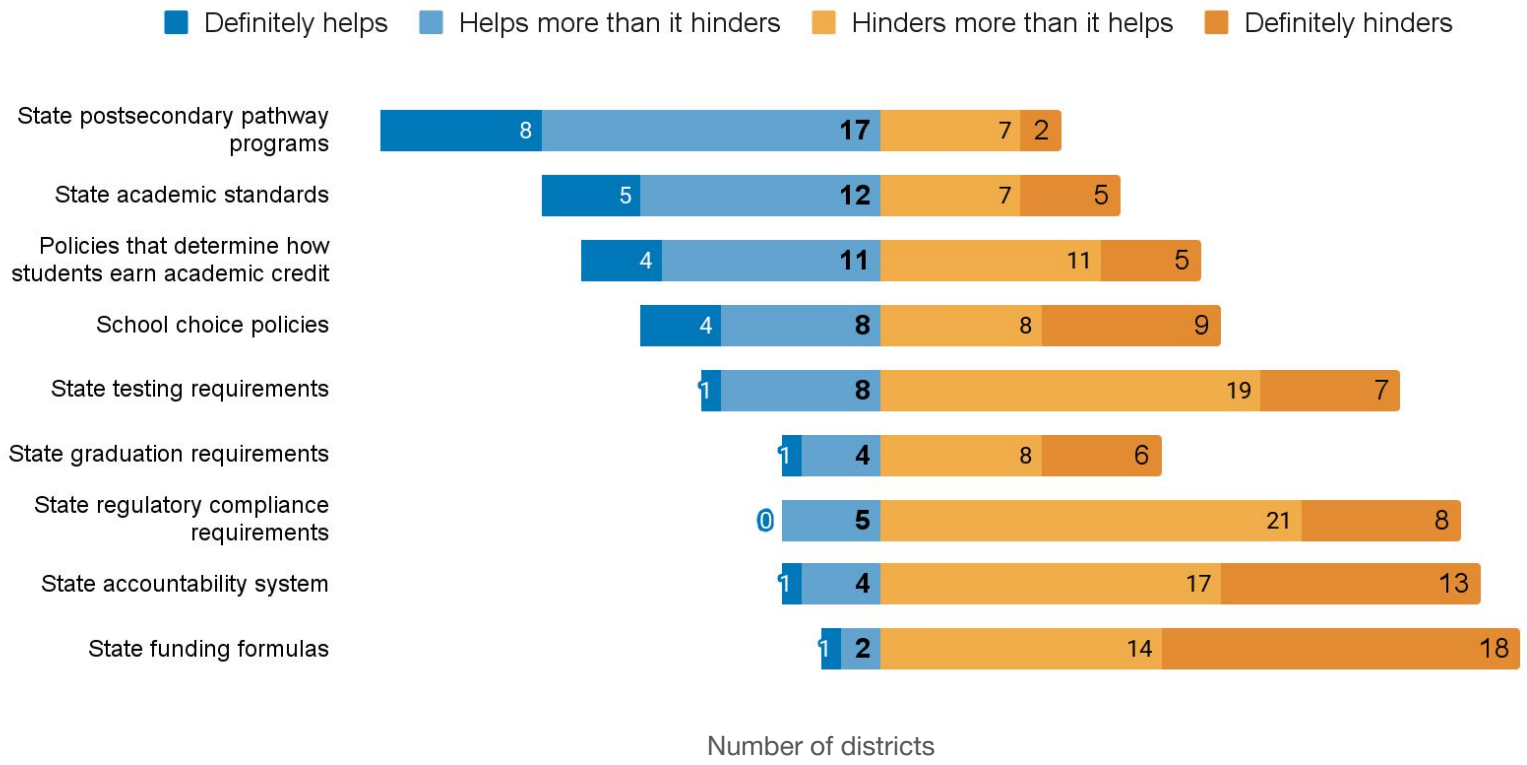
What are districts working on this year (SY25-26) - Vermont Superintendents





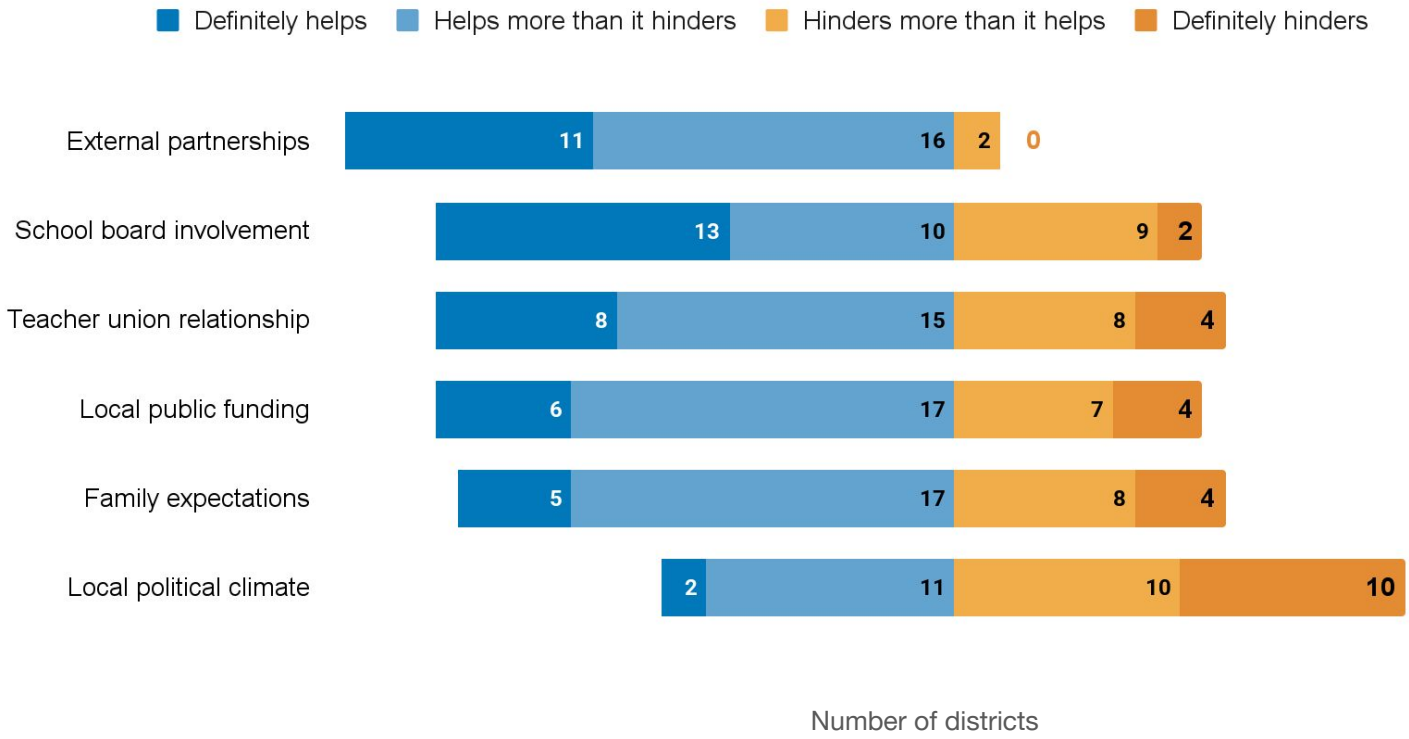
Supports and Barriers

State Policy Factors: Help vs. Hinder - Vermont Superintendents



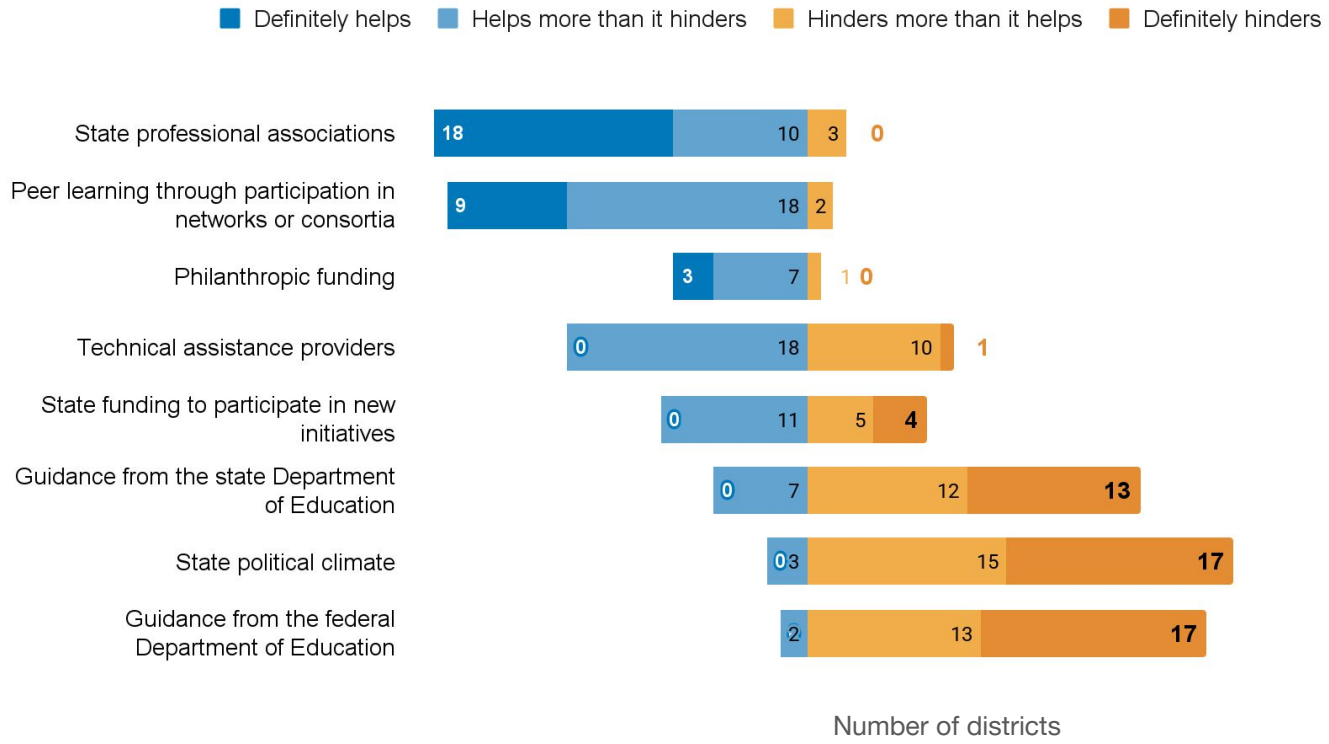
Note: Chart omits districts that marked “N/A” for a given factor

Local Factors: Helps vs. Hinders - Vermont Superintendents



Note: Chart omits districts that marked “N/A” for a given factor

Other External Factors: Helps vs. Hinders - Vermont Superintendents



Note: Chart omits districts that marked “N/A” for a given factor

Panelists



Lynn Cota
Superintendent,
Franklin Northeast
Supervisory Union



Bill Kimball
Superintendent,
Maple Run Unified
School District



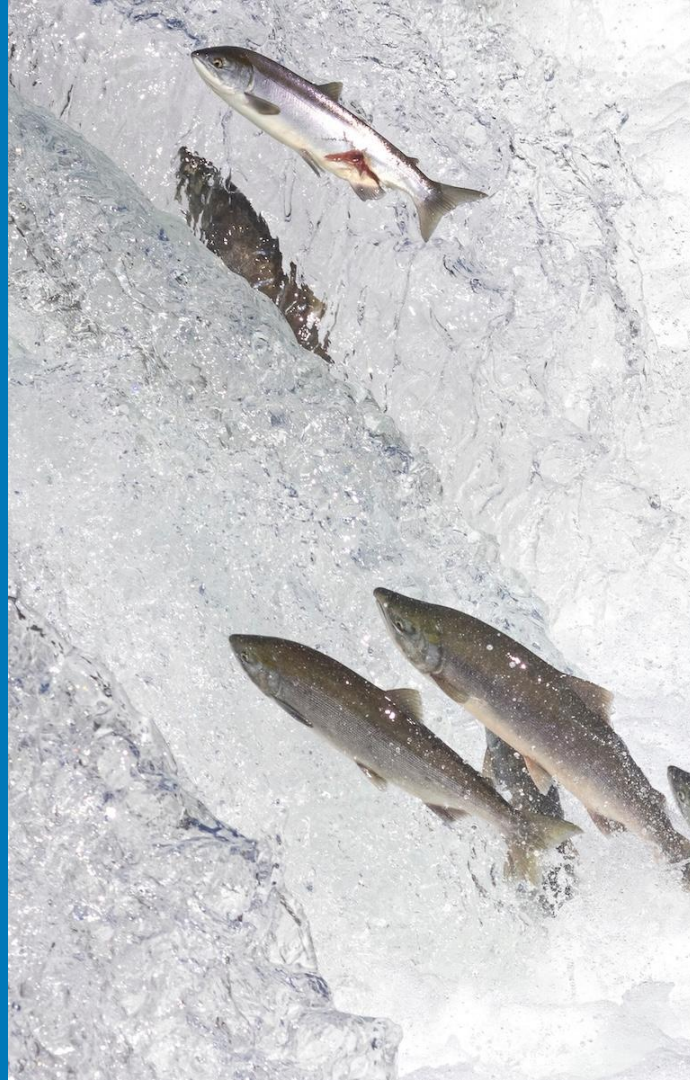
Sherry Sousa
Superintendent,
Mountain Views
Supervisory Union

Discussion Question

Think of a change your district scaled back, slowed down, or never proposed. What made it feel not worth attempting?

Policymakers, funders, intermediaries, and governance bodies must **decide whether to invest in helping more leaders swim upstream…**

…or in **changing the direction of the river.**



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mberard2@asu.edu

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