

VSBA PRESIDENT

TO: VSBA Membership
FROM: Flor Diaz Smith
DATE: October 2024

As I sit down to write my first President's Report for the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA), I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude and reflection. Growing up in Guatemala and immigrating to the United States as a young adult, I never imagined that my journey would lead me here, serving as President of this vital organization. If my work in education could be described as a journey, it would be one of discovery—of equity, inclusivity, understanding, compromise, and diversity. My path has unfolded in ways I could never have planned, presenting both challenges and opportunities that have deepened my appreciation for public education and strengthened my resolve to contribute to its advancement.

Our staff—led by Executive Director Sue Ceglowski and Sandra Cameron, along with Kerri Lamb and Debbie Singer—has shown unwavering commitment to our mission. We welcomed David Englander this June and bid farewell to Cara Zimmerman, whose contributions will be greatly missed. The dedication of our staff, whether in delivering legislative testimony, developing resources, or supporting school boards, inspires me daily. I am also deeply saddened to announce that Kerri will be leaving us to relocate to Missouri. I am immensely thankful for her contributions and the impact she has had on public education in Vermont, and on the VSBA. She will be missed dearly.

As I reflect on our accomplishments over the past year. I am in awe of what our small but mighty team has achieved. A few highlights include:

- We launched a membership survey to gain valuable insights into our diverse community, which will help us better tailor our services to meet everyone's needs. It also prompts us to reflect on who is at the table and who is not, guiding us toward diversifying our local school boards to ensure that all voices are heard and represented. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Sandra Cameron for her invaluable work on this initiative.
- We participated in the first EQS Report, a collaborative effort among the VSBA, VPA, VSA, VTCLA, VT-NEA, AOE, and others, to ensure alignment with state and local initiatives. Each organization is contributing member-specific insights to support the successful implementation of the new EQS Manual, effective July 1, 2025. Education Quality Standards (EQS), changes are intended to increase educational, social and emotional support for all students, and contain provisions that focus on the unique and compelling needs of students living in poverty, those from BIPOC families, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, those with disabilities, and those who are multilingual. School boards play a key role by approving curricula, ensuring funding for professional development, and supporting district leaders in meeting the updated guidelines.

- We provided guidance and self-evaluation tools to school districts on complying with the District Quality Standards (DQS), which are designed to ensure that every student has equal access to a quality education. These new standards guide school district operations, including budgeting, governance, and facilities management.
- This year, we introduced special resources to help address the challenges of the FY2026 budgeting cycle. In August, the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA), Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA), and Vermont Association of School Business Officials (VASBO) released a Collaborative Budgeting Memo with helpful tips for early budgeting. We will continue offering budgeting resources tailored to members' needs.
- This year, we expanded our training efforts with more monthly webinars tailored to your needs and offered additional connection opportunities for our board chairs. We also hosted training sessions for board chairs and superintendents, while providing direct support to many boards. If your board could benefit from further training or any of our other services, please don't hesitate to reach out.
- I am particularly proud of the work done by the Task Force on Collaboration to Benefit All Students. The recommendations to expand and maintain a comprehensive data dashboard, improve the capacity of the Agency of Education, and utilize DQS to enhance the State Board of Education's function aim to foster accountability and cooperation among stakeholders.

As we enter another busy legislative session and budgeting season, we are reminded of the vital role that education plays in our society, especially during this historically challenging time in public education. We have both a moral obligation and a profound opportunity to rethink and reshape Vermont's educational system; to reframe perceptions; and to address the complexities of our current challenges by embracing a significant shift in statewide public education leadership. But we must also balance our unwavering support for public education with the financial realities faced by our taxpayers. If we want to ensure that every student has the resources and opportunities they need to succeed, we must allow the Commission on the Future of Public Education to do its work, creating a vision that offers equal educational opportunities for all students in an efficient and sustainable manner.

As school board members, we have a unique and vital responsibility to shape a more equitable world for everyone. Public education is the bedrock of our democracy and our work carries with it tremendous urgency and significance. We have been given a voice in shaping the future of our country, and we must use it to benefit everyone, including those whose voices have historically been unheard or unheeded. By working together with openness, understanding, compromise, and compassion, we not only strengthen our schools but we set a powerful example for the next generation. I warmly invite all our members and voting delegates to join us at our remote annual meeting on October 17th at 6 p.m. and on Thursday, October 24, 2024, and Friday, October 25, 2024, at Lake Morey Resort for the Annual VSBA/VSA Fall Conference. The theme for this year's conference is "Together Toward Tomorrow,"

With admiration for the work you do and gratitude for the privilege of serving as your President,



Flor Diaz Smith