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## Higher ed

### School costs are up — but so are student gains

By KEVIN O'CONNOR

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Is Vermont's ongoing fight over how to fund schools overshadowing gains in its classrooms?

When the Council on the Future of Vermont asked residents about their most pressing concerns, it heard fury about property taxes for education.

"We can't pay \$1.7 million for less than 50 students," one Champlain Islands resident said.

The council heard fear about the fact the average college student-loan debt of \$30,000 has leapt by more than 150 percent in the past 15 years.

"Will my children's children be able to afford to go?" one Northeast Kingdom parent asked.

It heard frustration that teachers must instruct some students not only to raise their hands, but also to wash them.

"Now the school is trying to be the family," one Essex County resident said, "but the school can only do so much."

Then, after surveying almost 4,000 Vermonters at more than 100 meetings over 18 months, the nonprofit, nonpartisan study group reviewed the rest of the numbers:

— The state's most recent SAT reading and math scores (519/523) are up compared to the previous year (516/518) and the country (502/515). Ten years ago, the state's numbers (508/504) were below the national average.

— Its high school dropout rate is down from 4.67 percent a decade ago to 3.25 percent today.

— With 35.5 percent of adults having college degrees, it's the sixth best-educated state in the country.

"Education in Vermont can be seen as one of the state's greatest success stories," the council writes in its 112-page report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future." "While Vermont's performance is high compared to the rest of the nation, these accomplishments, especially the declining dropout rate for high school students,

do not seem to be celebrated by the Vermont public and policy leaders."

Instead, as students prepare for a new academic year, parents, teachers and the public are stuck in the same old fiscal fight.

"Many Vermonters believe that the ongoing debate about school funding is taking the focus away from an equally important challenge," the council writes. "Can communities and the state change the educational system so that it more effectively meets the needs of young people today and prepares them for the opportunities and challenges ahead?"

'What the future holds'

Vermonters value the role of schools "to develop the innovative entrepreneurs who will create the businesses that will seed the state's future prosperity," the study group states.

"Education is crucial," one St Albans resident testified. "Vermont needs to be willing to spend money."

But many taxpayers are balking — and not just because of the shaky economy.

The state's grade K-12 enrollment of 92,572 students has dropped 13 percent from a peak of 106,341 a decade ago. But its per-pupil cost has doubled since 1992, making Vermont the sixth highest in the country, according to a council-commissioned study by the Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College in Colchester.

The biggest reason for the rise: a more than 20 percent jump in school staffers in the past 10 years. Vermont now boasts the nation's lowest student-teacher ratio at 10-to-1. Health insurance, energy and special education costs also are up — the latter at about twice the rate of other school spending.

In its report, the council pinpoints two ways the state could address tax bills, but each sparks controversy.

Residents surveyed remain divided over the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1997, or Act 60, which funds local schools through per-pupil block grants paid for by a statewide property tax. People in poorer communities like the idea of pooling money for distribution; those in richer ones loathe it.

"Many Vermonters still feel that the funding mechanism for public education is unfair to their town, and many towns find it hard to fund all the services that the public has come to expect from schools," the council reports. "Some voices support the funding equity achieved ... but clearly, hard feelings remain, and there are serious concerns about what the future holds."

That said, the council didn't hear anyone propose a popular alternative.

## Everything to gain?

The idea of consolidating the state's 313 public schools and 60 supervisory unions also provoked "strong positions," the council states. Some Vermonters in small districts want to share resources to save money and give students more options.

"Consolidation needs to come," one Northeast Kingdom resident testified.

But according to council research, "costs do not necessarily decrease as more students are put under one roof." And many Vermonters who favor local control see their school as a community center.

"When we lost our school," one Granby resident said of the town's decision to merge its school with another district, "we lost everything."  
Many educators see everything to gain.

"Teachers, administrators and policy makers find themselves challenged to keep up with the growing demands on the educational system without a unified vision and a consensus strategy for advancing the goals of education in Vermont," the council states.

Grade schools aren't alone in wrestling costs. A local University of Vermont undergraduate this academic year will pay \$11,712 in tuition, \$9,026 for room and board and \$1,812 in other fees — a \$22,550 total that's up 5 percent from last year.

A Castleton State College student will pay \$7,992 in tuition, \$7,808 for room and board and \$828 in other fees — a \$16,628 total that's also up 5 percent.

About 65 percent of Vermont high school graduates seek higher education. But the number of students enrolling in out-of-state institutions now surpasses those studying here, the council discovered.

"Vermont faces the conundrum of struggling to meet rising costs for K-12 and postsecondary education while realizing that education is a key economic driver and may be the single most critical long-term investment supporting the economic prosperity of Vermonters in the years ahead," it states.

## 'Why they should stay'

Bringing about balance is all the more difficult when, as one policymaker stuck in the fiscal fight testified, "the environment in Vermont around public education is toxic right now."

All the bad blood, the council says, is drowning out the good news. At the grade-school level, it notes, "the trend in educational testing shows modest student improvements in a number of areas" and adds, "despite the ubiquitous concern about the costs of education, Vermonters continue to pass school budgets."

As for higher education, while many students are migrating out, the council found that the state imports more to attend its colleges and universities than it exports. As a result, Vermont's six public and 18 private colleges and universities now make up the state's fourth-largest industry, annually boosting its gross domestic product by more than \$2 billion.

"Many see the out-migration of Vermont youth as one of the major challenges for the state in coming years," the council says. "They bemoan the loss of young people but have not built the argument for why they should stay. ... Vermonters emphasized that giving young people good reasons (good jobs, affordable housing, and good quality of life) to move back to the state is crucial for the future."

Specifically, an overwhelming majority of people who spoke to the council called for stronger ties between the state's schools and workforce training.

"I went to work at 16," one Bennington elder said, "but now you need a good education to get a job."

"A large segment of our population hasn't been able to or been motivated enough to get the kind of education they need to be successful in today's society," another Vermonter added. "Does it touch the rest of us enough to address it?"

'Opportunity to succeed'

"Vermonters," the council concludes, "need to recognize the different capacities and learning styles of students to ensure that all have an opportunity to succeed."

But its report — available on the Web at [www.futureofvermont.org](http://www.futureofvermont.org) — acknowledges the challenges of being all things to all people. With many parents working or single, schools must provide breakfast and lunch, after-hours programs and lessons on hygiene, sex, and alcohol and drug abuse.

"Parents aren't involved," one Northeast Kingdom resident lamented, "and everything relies on the teachers."

Conversely, others complained that although education is increasingly expensive, "the state is not adequately supplying students with the skills and creativity that will allow them to meet the future with confidence," the council states.

Said a Glover entrepreneur: "The world that our kids are headed into is a very different world and we need to teach the kids based on an unknown future. We need to provide an education with global viewpoints instead of an American-centric viewpoint."

And a Barre mother: "How do we rebuild our education system so kids know how to make affordable homes, create victory gardens as we move from a corporate food economy to a local economy? Schools are not giving them the skills they need —

school systems should challenge our kids to be peacemakers.”

Others want more old-fashioned civics.

Said a Hyde Park war veteran: “Our children, your children, are not being taught any values in school — they don’t have a clue they are supposed to stand up and respect the color guard.”

And a Bennington resident: “Service opportunities can be offered through every grade of school. That will promote a spirit of community and worth in young people.”  
Some want students to learn about fiscal discipline.

“The curriculum,” one Newport resident complained, “doesn’t teach financial literacy, especially budgeting and planning to meet your life goals.”

And ultimately, all Vermonters want schools to model that, too.

“We want education to be efficient,” one Hyde Park resident said, “not a burden on our taxpayers.”

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