

The following chapters are the synthesis of public forum notes and interviews, statistical polling, written comments, trend line research, and the many other contributions from Vermonters described in the Introduction in Part One of *Imagining Vermont*. They reflect, to the best of the Council's ability, the essence of what Vermonters shared. The Council's purpose in these chapters is to reflect what we have gathered about important subjects, whether they are emotional, divisive or matter-of-fact. All of the information was organized into ten key issues areas: *Vermont Culture; Population; Natural Environment; Working Landscape: Agriculture and Forestry; Built Environment: Development and Land Use; Economy; Education; Human Services, Health, and Safety; Infrastructure; and Energy*.

While each chapter encompasses a wide range of research and discussion, a common framework is used. Quotes from Vermonters illustrate specific points or show a range of opinions, and research and polling provide balance to the individual voices, lending authority or illuminating contradictions in the ideas expressed. All references, unless otherwise noted, are from the St. Michael's report *Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends*, the companion volume to this report. When UVM's Center for Rural Studies web and telephone surveys are referenced, these percentages and data are found in the *Looking Ahead: Vermonters' Values and Concerns* reports.

The Council invites every reader to think about conclusions from the data and what directions it might suggest for Vermont. These chapters summarize what the Council heard; the Council's own conclusions can be found in Part Two of *Imagining Vermont*.





Education



In its public forums, the Council on the Future of Vermont heard many opinions about how education in Vermont is managed today, and expansive hopes for what Vermont's educational system could be and could accomplish. Throughout the state, many Vermonters value education highly and see it as key to the state's ability to confront successfully the economic challenges ahead. A commonly expressed vision for education (from middle school to higher education) is to prepare students for success in the 21st century. To meet this expectation, Vermont schools will require significant funding, as well as professional and volunteer resources.

Rising costs of education are a universal concern, in both the tax structure required to pay for Vermont's public K-12 schools and the tuition increases for Vermont colleges. Not everyone agrees with the way public schools are financed today, just as they do not agree on what must be taught for young people to thrive and to be good citizens. However, it is clear that the majority of Vermonters see improving public education system and participation in post-secondary

education as a way towards solving the many complicated economic and social issues facing the state.

National trends show that the higher the level of education, the higher per capita income an individual can expect. Vermont faces the conundrum of struggling to meet rising costs for K-12 and post-secondary 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.

School buildings themselves are of value to communities, providing many resources, from small libraries and performance spaces to neutral sites to host town business, civic meetings, and social events. But even more than the building, the presence of the school as a social, cultural, and educational center can make it the one place where parents, children, educators, and other community members interact. Many Vermonters view local K-12 schools in particular, managed by local school boards, with low student to teacher ratios, as the heart of their towns.

Controversies of K-12: Costs and Consolidation

Any public forum that considers K-12 education in Vermont will soon come to the subject of cost. Despite decreasing enrollments, school expenditures continue to rise, resulting in increased expenditures per student. The growth of instructional, administrative and support personnel per student, the dramatic increase in special education expenses, and burgeoning health insurance and energy costs that burden all Vermont schools combine to drive up the costs of running a school. The per-student cost of education in Vermont has doubled since 1992, making Vermont the sixth highest in the nation in per pupil expenditure in K-12 education. Vermont also has the lowest student-to-teacher ratio – 10 to 1 – in the country. Participants in CFV forums both praised this ratio for positive student results and blamed it for higher costs.

As Vermonters discuss costs, many still complain of unfairness in how cost burdens are shared town to town and statewide. In 1997, the Vermont General Assembly passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (known commonly as Act 60), the purpose of which was to increase equity among school districts with widely varying amounts of local property values. Under Act 60 and Act 68, equal access to revenues per pupil is provided, irrespective of the relative property wealth of the community.

Although Act 68 and Act 130 have modified the education funding structure in the state and added educational policy provisions, in general it was Act 60 that Vermonters talked most about in public forums. 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. As one person commented, “We lost a lot of input when we went to Act 60.” A Windham County resident expressed the feelings of others: “We’re a so-called ‘Gold Town,’ meaning we’re a net contributor to the school funding formula. This is a major issue... the area is sending money to Montpelier for distribution to other school districts, while the educational infrastructure at home is literally crumbling.” Some voices support the funding equity achieved through Act 60 and Act 68; but clearly, hard feelings remain, and there are serious concerns about what the future holds.

The provisions of Acts 60 and 68 have caused much debate, but the larger issue for most Vermonters is that supporting school costs has become an

enormous challenge in every town. A CFV survey respondent in the Champlain Islands wrote, “We can’t pay \$1.7 million for less than 50 students...it’s a terrible challenge.” One St Albans resident spoke for many about education as a priority and the personal and public sacrifices necessary for success: “Education is crucial... Vermont needs to be willing to spend money.”

Most people living in Vermont think of it as a place with a high quality of life where citizens place high value in providing for excellent and equitable education for all, even though there is a lower than average per capita income here than in other states. Despite the ubiquitous concern about the costs of education, Vermonters continue to pass school budgets. At these local decision points, Vermonters generally choose to pay in order to support the best education they can for the youth of the community.

Research shows that expenditures per student have steadily increased at a rate higher than inflation. Some Vermonters see increasing education expenditures as extravagant and unsustainable government spending, while others see it as a mark of positive commitment to excellence in education. The primary driver behind this increase in the cost in public education is the growth of school personnel per student, most particularly in special education, where expenditures grew at twice the rate of those for regular education between 1996 and 2001. School districts also face cost pressures from the dramatic increase in health insurance and energy costs. In a public forum in Hyde Park, one respondent said: “We want education to be efficient, not a burden on our taxpayers.”

There are strong positions in Vermont about school consolidation – both for and against it – and across the state Vermonters wrestle with the difficult challenge of how to evaluate these competing options in the context of reduced funding. Vermonters tend to want to preserve small town school local governance and the school as the community center. A resident of Granby testified about some consequences of the decision to consolidate her community’s school with another school district: “When we lost our school we lost everything. We lost our sense of community.” At the same time, Vermonters voice a strong desire for the efficiencies and opportunities that might be possible from consolidation, such as advanced classes, laboratories, and access to technology. A resident at a public forum in Island Pond said, “I believe that the state of Vermont needs to rebuild its educational system. Education needs to be looked at; we have to have a strong focus on standards, academics. And consolidation needs to come.” Interestingly, research shows that costs do not necessarily decrease as more students are put under one roof.

While there is tremendous talent and dynamism in the educational sector today, the evidence from research and from the voices of Vermonters shows that Vermont lacks a clear consensus around which public education structures are essential to prepare young people for the next century. As one educational policy maker put it, with all the needs we are facing today, we are paralyzed by a dialogue that focuses exclusively on costs. As a result, “the environment in Vermont around public education is toxic right now.”

Assessment and Results

Some of Vermont’s most heated policy debates revolve around the cost and financing of public education without necessarily addressing the long-term goals of the system or its current performance. In public forums and focus groups across the state, Vermonters echoed the perennial debate around costs, much less often referring to the significant achievements of the educational system today. Yet, seen from a comparative perspective, research documents that education in Vermont can be seen as one of the state’s greatest success stories.

By most educational measures, Vermont is in the top quintile of national rankings on school performance. The changing methodology of student performance tests makes it difficult to make comparisons over time, but Vermont students score well in assessments, and the state has an abundance of positive educational data. For example, in 2007, Vermont ranked eleventh in the nation in the percent of adults (Vermonters over the age of 25) who graduated from high school. Significantly, Vermont ranked the sixth best-educated state in the nation, measured by the proportion of adult citizens with bachelors and advanced degrees.

Over the years, the state has used a variety of assessment instruments; some have been statewide, some regional, and currently Vermont participates in the nationwide assessment of student learning (National Assessment of Educational Progress). Based on the raw scores, Vermont students traditionally score higher than the national average on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) verbal tests. Recently, Vermont students scored slightly above average on the SAT math tests as well. The high school drop-out rate has been declining. While Vermont’s performance is high compared to the rest of the nation, these accomplishments, especially the declining drop-out rate for high school students, do not seem to be celebrated by the Vermont public and

policy leaders, and were not recognized by those who participated in CFV forums and surveys.

Few Vermonters feel complacent about school performance. Some shared their perception that K-12 students are not learning to national standards, especially in math and science, and that Vermont should upgrade curriculum standards for science, technology, engineering, and math education to give future students a jumpstart into the workplace.

In an interview with the Council, members of the Vermont School Boards Association testified that their local school board constituents tell them that there is disagreement about what a good education means in their districts and throughout the state. There is a enormous tension about all the roles that schools are expected to play. For some participants in public forums, schools should focus only on academic disciplines. Others worry that Vermonters turn over to schools too much of what have traditionally been family responsibilities. As one respondent from Essex County put it, “Now the school is trying to be the family – but the school can only do so much!” Others welcome the expansion of roles as a social good and see education as a doorway to the future, exposing young minds to new technologies, new experiences, and resources beyond what the family and community provide.

While acknowledging that Vermont’s education system performs well when measured by standardized testing, Vermonters speak about other qualities and values they also see as important to educating youth, that don’t get measured in tests. Threaded throughout the CFV forums was the idea that schools should teach many things that are less quantifiable than reading writing and math: team work, problem solving, adaptability, healthy living, and other skills that will help young people adapt to the economy and the culture of the twenty-first century.

Many Vermonters believe that the ongoing debate about school funding is taking the focus away from an equally important challenge: 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?

“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,” remarked a young entrepreneur from Glover. Many see the need for education that will allow young people to learn the practical skills to advance in a more sustainable economy. A mother in Barre asks,



“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.” An attendee at our Randolph forum put it succinctly for others in attendance: “We will need to develop more educational programs that model sustainability.”

Others think that Vermont needs to expand civics education for a new generation. A Bennington resident posited that providing students opportunities for service and leadership would help prepare them for citizenship; “Service opportunities can be offered through every grade of school. That will promote a spirit of community and worth in young people.” A veteran from the VFW in Hyde Park expressed the need to train youth in traditions and values, “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.” Several Vermonters also explained to CFV how education in Vermont could more effectively use this unique *place* – the social, economic, geographic, and biological frameworks of one small state – to describe how other systems outside the Green Mountains work.

Skills and Technologies

In conversations across Vermont, the Council repeatedly heard from citizens about the imperative of preparing students to adapt and succeed in the future. In most forums, the Council heard about the connection between a well-educated public, job creation, and career skills development. A school board member claimed that education could be the foundation of future prosperity; “There is a connection between economic development and education but it’s about good schools... we need to focus on excellence in education; this could be the way to bring in the entrepreneurs, the jobs, the young families.” A resident

of Hyde Park spoke of education as a needed investment that could pay high returns in future economic activity. He asked, “How does what we do in schools set us up to be in a position to attract and keep the intellectual capital of the future?” An elder at Bennington Project Independence pointed to major changes since he grew up, “You have to have a good education system. I went to work at sixteen, but now you need a good education to get a job.”

When it comes to career and skills development, Vermonters want to see more vocational, technical, and alternative routes in education. Vermonters recognize that some students learn more effectively through mechanical and vocational education; they want to ensure that the state system doesn’t neglect this important path to jobs: “We put too much [emphasis] on college education rather than the trades,” according to a St. Johnsbury resident.

Technical education, workforce education, and access to high-speed information technologies are tools that many Vermonters want to see used more effectively in local schools to align student skills with careers in the future. Many comments at the public forums focused on tailoring education to the skill sets that young people will need in the workforce of tomorrow. The need for a stronger connection between K-12 education and workforce development is emphasized by Vermonters from the Higher Education Council to inmates at the St. Johnsbury work camp, from the Vermont School Boards Association to people who came out to public forums.

Vermonters agree that children today need to be prepared to compete with workers and professionals nationally and globally by having access to and learning how to use up-to-date information and communications technologies. To respond to rapid change and to participate in curriculum beyond those offered directly in local schools, information technology and communications infrastructure is seen as a critically important educational tool by most Vermonters.

Secondary and post secondary schools in Vermont today struggle to keep pace with the astonishing rate of knowledge accumulation and the challenge of keeping infrastructure and technology up to date. Remote and rural schools – where connectivity isn’t available or the culture of internet use is undeveloped – are clearly at risk in terms of the demands of the twenty-first century. The investments needed are significant but crucial to Vermont’s educational success and long term prosperity.

At the same time, many Vermonters point to challenges in advancing technology, how it is used, and what its long-term effects may be. Students are seen as “digital natives;” they have grown up with the Internet and mobile communications as essential parts of their culture, in contrast to teachers and parents who are not familiar or comfortable with the tools of technology available to them. Some Vermonters also reflect that the emphasis in education should not be on speed and technology, but on teaching students how to process, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information accumulating at an unprecedented level.

Some Vermonters express reservations about the growing digital culture. They shared their worries about the danger of the loss of face-to-face communication to media screens, and expressed their concern about the growing role of “virtual communities” that could take the place of participation in the physical and local communities where they live. A Randolph attendee warned that, “Young people don’t see the value of actual physical community rather than virtual community.” And a St. Albans resident cautioned against allowing technology to take the place of content-based educational attainment; “Computers, Internet, TV, cell phones make it a different world. There used to be a big stigma around not doing well in school – kids now don’t seem to care so much about doing well.”

On the other hand, citizens around the state feel that students should be getting not just discipline-based knowledge; they also need to learn social, living, coping, and economic literacy skills – like balancing a check book, knowing how to interview for a job, learning how to write a resume, or managing activities so that work is priority. A Newport resident points out that with all its complexity, the curriculum “doesn’t teach financial literacy... especially budgeting and planning to meet your life goals.”

In the uncertain economic times faced by the state in 2008 and 2009, the reality is, according to a speaker from the Community Justice Center St. Albans: “Today one must have a high school diploma or a GED in order to get jobs. Even at McDonald’s.”

Cost Challenges in Higher Education

Higher education is rarely recognized as an economic driver for the state of Vermont. Research shows, however, that the six public and eighteen private institutions of higher education combine to create the fourth largest industry in the state. A recent study by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) estimates that the direct and indirect impact of higher education on the state’s Gross Domestic Product is over two billion dollars a year. The abundance of activities offered by the state’s private and public colleges and universities contribute to Vermont’s quality of life and provide many civic, cultural, and recreational opportunities. But higher education faces significant challenges in the coming years.

The rising cost of higher education is a primary concern for Vermonters. At a public forum

in St. Johnsbury, one respondent posed this question: “Will my children’s children be able to afford to go to college?” Higher education in Vermont is expensive for students, and like K-12 education, its costs have risen more rapidly than the rate of inflation in recent years. Many students are graduating with massive student debt. The average accumulated debt for students with loans from Vermont Student Assistance Corporation increased by 150% between 1993 and 2005.

Vermonters feel this cost burden and worry about the affordability of higher education for their children. As one respondent told CFV: “I cannot put my children through college, but there are many scholarships and state support to help... maybe they’ll get in somewhere.” The amount of grant money from the state and federal government available in real terms to Vermont students has increased only marginally for nearly two and a half decades, while college costs and the need for loans have risen significantly. At the same time, state appropriations for higher education have been declining relative to the total state budget for the past two decades. Vermont’s institutions of

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higher education see the results in tighter budgets, and Vermont students are finding college less affordable and, when they do attend, leave with debts that will impact their economic capacity for years to come.

Vermont Students and Higher Education

While the percentage of Vermont high school graduates attending post-secondary education rose from the 1970s to the 1990s, the rate has not varied much since then. In the last few years, around 64 percent of high school graduates have gone on to higher education. This trend reflects what is occurring across the nation as a whole.

Leaders of the state's colleges are concerned that most Vermonters do not understand clearly enough the connection between higher education and the economy. A member of the Vermont Higher Education Council called for "educating the populace so they know the values of higher education – for themselves and for the community." Research showed the Council that nationally in 2004 the unemployment rate was around 7 percent for those people with twelve years or fewer of education, while those who had a college degree had an unemployment rate of approximately 2 percent. It is also well known that an individual's earnings increase with additional years of education; average monthly earnings for a high school graduate nationally in 2004 were around \$600, while someone with a Master's degree averaged over \$1000 a month.

Research shows that a smaller percentage of Vermont students are attending in-state colleges and universities than are selecting educational programs outside the state. The number of recent Vermont high school graduates attending in-state colleges dropped by 300 students in the decade between 1994 and 2004, while the number attending college out of state increased by over 600 students. Enrollment in private Vermont institutions has historically been between 15,000 to 16,000 students, while enrollment in public institutions, the University of Vermont, and State College system, held steady between 1990 and 2000 at 20,000 students, and then rose by about 4,500 students in the last eight years.

Vermonters worry about sending students out of state to study, and many see the out-migration of Vermont youth as one of the major challenges for the state in coming years. They bemoan the loss of young people but have not built the argument for why they should stay. One young woman in Randolph identified a challenge inherent in the Vermont debate about the

loss of youth itself: "The message is being sent to our young people that to be successful, they need to move away. We see our communities as being incapable of educating the smartest young people and so only the failures stay here. We are speaking from our fears."

This out-migration for the college years is more than offset by an inflow of students from other states, making Vermont a net importer of college-age youth. The fact that Vermont is a net importer of college students, and that many of the young people who came to school in previous decades have become leading entrepreneurs in the development of signature Vermont businesses, raises the question of how Vermont helps innovative youth stay and build careers or businesses after graduation now and in future.

What emerges from this complex picture of the movement of young people into and out of Vermont for post-secondary schooling is that education has a strong role to play in bringing young people here; the state's private and public educational institutions give Vermont an excellent reputation for education. Throughout the state, many Vermonters recognize institutions of higher education as economic engines today, but also as vehicles to both retain and attract the innovative youth who will spearhead the economy of the future. A St. Albans participant claimed that, "If you can offer the education, you can get people who are excited about it and then use the education platform to build the mass of young excited people. They could be the economic drivers."

Equality and Diversity in Education

In public forums throughout the state, people talked about how they would like to promote education that supports all students to achieve a prosperous future: honor roll students, average students, at risk students, and adult students working through continuing education and workforce training. Each kind of student has specific educational needs. One respondent put it this way: "A large segment of our population hasn't been able to or motivated enough to get the kind of education they need to be successful in today's society. Does it touch the rest of us enough to address it?"

Research shows that overall school enrollments have fallen in Vermont since the turn of the twenty-first century, while, notably, the enrollment of minority and English as a Second Language (ESL) students has been one of the few growth segments. Throughout Vermont the percentage of all students who are minorities in the K-12 system has grown significantly, from 1.8 percent

in 1990 to 6 percent in 2008. The Council met with immigrant groups and heard from educators concerned with providing appropriate services to support students from the increasing number of homes with primary language other than English, especially in Burlington where there are students with forty-seven different primary dialects, and Winooski, where one quarter of all students are learning English as a second language.

The issue of equal educational opportunities for all students with diverse needs and backgrounds was expressed in different ways through interviews and public meetings. Vermonters wonder if the needs of the diverse populations of students across the state are being met today and how they might be met in the future. Many believe that Vermont will see increasing numbers of immigrants over time, and statistics show that Black and Hispanic families tend to have more children than those of White Vermonters. Many Vermonters told the Council that quality early childhood education is critically important to provide all children with an equal start, even if their specific needs are different. Some told the Council that marginalized groups, such as children from low income families, are not getting equal education or the opportunities to succeed in Vermont.

and be safe while adults are occupied. Inadequate nutrition at home? Provide school meals using healthy, local foods. And on top of all the new curricular areas and social concerns the school must address, residents, like this Northeast Kingdom forum participant, have additional complaints, “School is just not rigorous enough. Parents aren’t involved and everything relies on the teachers.”

Education in Vermont is called upon to provide structured opportunities for learning in formal and informal settings for every aspect and phase of Vermonters’ lives. This includes family structured learning; early childhood education and development; K-12, technical, and vocational education; post-secondary education; higher education; workforce education and training; personal enhancement, health, and civic education.

The Council heard that Vermonters want to see an education system that will support the educational needs of the diversity of Vermonters, from the emerging young scientist to adults who need to learn to read. Education also has a strong role to play in keeping young people in Vermont and in developing leaders to serve in the local, national, and global arenas. Vermonters place great emphasis on education as the seedbed for both innovation and a skilled workforce, the foundations for Vermont’s economic future.

In attempting to meet public expectations and address the many challenges before them, schools today have become increasingly expensive. Even so, many Vermonters are concerned that the state is not adequately supplying students with the skills and creativity that will allow them to meet the future with confidence. These challenges are compounded by the diverse and sometimes uncoordinated leadership structure for the K-12 system in Vermont, and the variety of interests working toward independent ends.

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.

Priorities



Education is a priority for Vermonters, but it is confronting long-term and difficult challenges that threaten the system’s ability to meet the needs of its students and the myriad goals and expectations of Vermonters. There are many demands for schools to cure the ills of society. Drug and alcohol abuse in young adults? Add programs for youth in schools that will help them respond to illegal and dangerous activities. Lack of an adequate workforce? Have schools partner with one another and with local businesses to increase career development among young people. Children with special needs? Design individual education plans and hire aides to support each child in learning as is best suited for him or her. Single parents who must work two or more jobs? Expand after-school programs that enable kids to learn