

Vermont Vision for Youth Success

June 2024

Findings and outcomes
of the Youth Opportunity
Initiative, an initiative of
the Vermont Proposition
and the Future of
Vermont Action Team



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The Youth Opportunity Advisory Group

John Castle, Executive Director, Vermont Rural Education Collaborative

Saraswoti Chhetri, Student, Burlington High School

Jess Decarolis, Division Director, Vermont Agency of Education

Sam Dingba, Case Manager, AALV

Emma Doucet, Student, Mt Abraham High School

Scott Farr, Superintendent, River Valley Tech Center

Carlen Finn, Senior Policy Associate, Voices for Vermont's Children

Jeff Francis, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Ben Freeman, (former) Network Coordinator, Vermont Learning for the Future

Lindsey Halman, Executive Director, UP For Learning

Tara Howe, Transition Program Manager, HireAbility

Mea Ree Jan, Student, Winooski High School and Essex Tech

Joyce Judy, President, Community College of VT

PJ King, (former) Youth Program Specialist, UP For Learning

Breck Knauff, Executive Director, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps

Kayla Loving, Co-Coordinator, Education Justice Coalition

Maddie McKinley, Student, Brattleboro Union High School

Lilian Sophie Meyer, Student, Main Street Middle School Montpelier

Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool

Dean Roy, Student, Stowe Middle School

Samantha Stevens, Community Schools Coordinator, North Country Supervisory Union

Rebecca Tatistcheff, Principal, Cabot School

Shawn Tester, CEO, Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital

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Produced by

Vermont Council on Rural Development

PO Box 1384, Montpelier VT 05601-1384

info@vtrural.org | vtrural.org

The Vermont Council on Rural Development helps Vermont citizens build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, marshalling resources, and collective action.

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Introduction, Purpose and Goals

The emotional and physical wellbeing of Vermont's people starts with our youth and a shared belief in a positive future. Our civic life, our economy, and the vitality of the State of Vermont relies on meeting the needs and aligning with the hopes, and dreams of our young people. In order to build strong communities and realize a vision of civic engagement, connection, belonging, and a thriving economy, we must support our youth with the tools, connections, care, and opportunities they need. The success of our communities is deeply connected to the ability of our youth to realize their educational, career, and life goals and aspirations and to access opportunities in Vermont and beyond.

It was for these reasons that the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) set out, charged by the Future of Vermont Action Team, to hear ideas from people of all ages around the state about how to boost opportunity and aspiration for young Vermonters. This work identified a set of interconnected threads — spanning from education and career training to mental health care, community vitality, and environmental health. What we found is that there are not one or two piecemeal strategies to address the immense challenges we face — instead, we must come together in a concerted effort that addresses a wide spectrum of youth needs. It won't be enough to focus solely on academic achievement or workforce readiness; rather, we must embrace and lift up a holistic approach that nurtures the physical, emotional, and social well-being of our youth — and builds deep connection to community and to Vermont.

Through the process, we heard about the many obstacles, concerns, and barriers that Vermont youth face. Yet, amidst the daunting challenges,

we find inspiration in the numerous success stories and bright spots which we will highlight in this report. In our conversations across the state, we were also struck by the passion for and dedication to seeking and supporting collaborative solutions. In schools, town halls, tech centers, libraries, teen hubs, and interviews around the state, we heard a clear collective vision emerge — a vision for a future where youth feel safe and connected in their communities; where there is equitable opportunity for all youth to access resources, jobs, activities, higher education, and more; where youth are integrated into public decision-making and leadership in a meaningful way; where walls are broken down between schools and the community to build resources and connections; and where adequate support and care is offered to address the many challenges and pressures that our youth face today.

Vermont has long been a model of community-driven initiatives and collective action. There is great opportunity for progress in building upon that past experience and applying it toward the current and future well-being of the youngest Vermonters. This report reflects the insights of over 600 Vermonters on how communities, schools, businesses, agencies, and organizations can collaborate to enhance the success and well-being of young people statewide. It serves as a foundational document and a call to action, not exhaustive, but rather a springboard for collective action aimed at improving Vermont as a place for youth to learn, grow, thrive, and succeed. Identifying six critical “threads” that require immediate attention, as well as cross-cutting strategies that emerged consistently across our discussions and surveys, the report charts a path toward a stronger foundation for Vermont's youth, crucial for the state's future strength and resilience.

History and Context

This report captures the findings and outcomes of the Youth Opportunity Initiative, an initiative of the Vermont Proposition and the Future of Vermont Action Team. The Proposition (futureofvermont.org) lays out a structured and non-partisan set of proposals, built on input from over 4,000 Vermonters, toward action for a thriving and prosperous future for Vermont. It identifies a list of major issue areas that speak to the challenges and opportunities facing our economy, our environment, our communities and our people. The Proposition is a starting point to promote action in the short term that will be essential for a strong and prosperous future over the long term. The proposition framework is designed to support policymaking, to prompt alignment between public and private action toward a common vision, and to establish a common language that builds understanding and empowers community volunteers, voters, investors, consumers and donors, and to support enterprises and initiatives that work in tandem toward common objectives.

The Future of Vermont Action Team (the Action Team) was the leadership team charged with developing and exploring the elements of the Vermont Proposition. In its first year, the Action Team identified elements of the Proposition that they felt most timely and pressing as a starting

point for their work. Youth opportunity, success, and aspiration was at the top of their priorities. Youth who are connected to their community, can access equitable opportunities, and are equipped to participate in a multicultural democracy and economy are a critical foundation to the future vitality and well-being of Vermont. The Action Team set out to identify what action is needed in the short term to ensure youth opportunity and success in the long term.

In order to determine critical action steps, the Action Team charged VCRD and an Advisory Group of youth and adult leaders to conduct a deep engagement process with people of all ages across the state. The process gathered input from youth, community and municipal leaders, educators, business leaders, policy experts, and more throughout 2023. The result is a framework of policy and programming recommendations to achieve a future where our youth are more deeply connected to their communities and where they can aspire to engage, thrive, and lead in a multicultural democracy and marketplace. The Youth Opportunity Advisory Group met over the course of the year to advise on the structure of the public engagement process, review the findings, and determine key action recommendations outlined in this report.

The Youth Opportunity Initiative Process: Who did we hear from?

One of the central goals of the Youth Opportunity Initiative was to understand the perspectives of a wide cross-section of Vermonters across geography, career and life experiences, racial identity, and age. We sought to identify issues most Vermonters agree need to be addressed to best support youth opportunity. We spread the word about ways to provide input through email, printed fliers, social media posts and events, personal invitation, and posts to every Front Porch Forum in the state.

VCRD collected reflections and ideas from a diversity of voices from all over the state through:

- **12 regional discussion forums.** In order to capture a broad geographic reach, we divided the state into six regions and held two forums in each region. Of the two forums, one was a “youth forum” held in a youth space, and the other a “regional forum” open to all ages and backgrounds held in a community space and co-facilitated by an adult and youth facilitator. Up For Learning was a critical partner in helping to

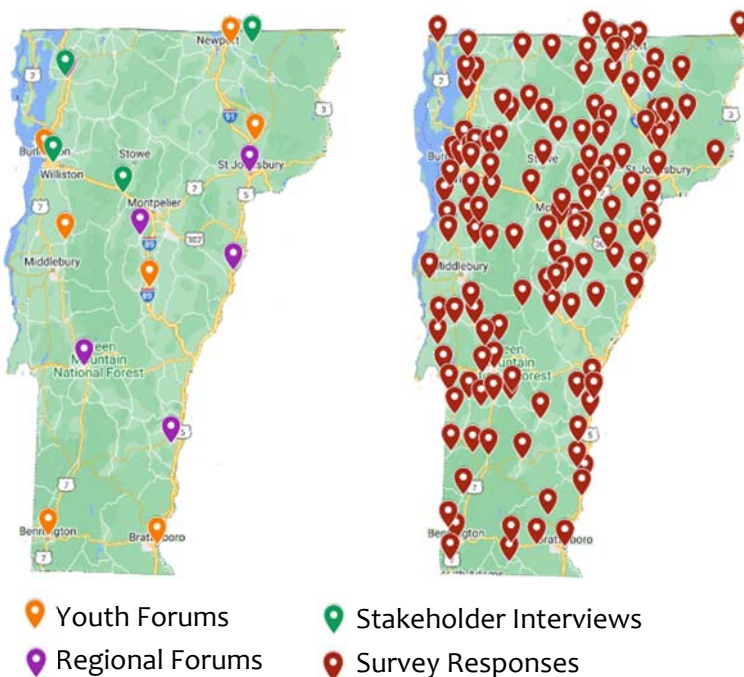
design intentional youth-adult spaces and in identifying and training youth facilitators.

- **4 Stakeholder interviews** with organizations, agencies, and groups of youth leaders and those that serve and support youth
- **Over 300 responses to an online survey** shared through a range of local, regional, and state partners — from libraries, social service providers, legislators, schools, arts groups and recreation centers to name a few — helped us hear from people with wildly different interests, roles in their community, and occupations.

Ultimately, this process gathered input from over 600 individuals through forums, interviews, and survey responses where we asked:

1. *What are the youth opportunity successes and challenges today?*
2. *What are your hopes and visions for the future?*
3. *What are your ideas for how to boost youth opportunity and aspiration in Vermont?*

Participant Demographics



- 7.7% of participants self-identified as BIPOC (vs. 6% of Vermont’s population). Specific identities listed included Black, African American, Latino/a, Asian, and multiple other races/ethnicities.
- 82% self-identified as white (vs. 92% of Vermont’s population).
- 10% didn’t specify their racial or ethnic identity.
- 30% were under 25 years old (vs. 28% of Vermont’s population).

Collective Vision for Youth Success

When conducting the forums and survey across the state, we asked the question “What are your hopes and visions for the future?” Below is a compiled and consolidated list of the hundreds of vision points we heard from people of all ages across the state. These are the common themes that were repeated over and over again as people pictured a future Vermont where youth are able to thrive and succeed.

We envision a future Vermont where:

Our education system...

- fosters a safe and inclusive environment.
- is an equitable and efficient system promoting excellence in education for the citizens of the future.
- adequately compensates, celebrates, and respects educators and other staff and faculty.
- is responsive and creative in the way we teach and learn.
- addresses bullying, racism, and harassment in schools.
- fosters strong community and parent connections.
- prioritizes early career pathway exploration.
- encourages and respects alternatives to post-secondary education.
- encourages students to pursue diverse interests.
- fosters youth leadership and engagement.

Youth feel prepared for work and life because...

- youth have had exposure from an early age to a variety of career pathways and options for ongoing training or higher education.
- young people are able to find what they are passionate about and get involved regardless of their background or circumstances.
- students graduate from school with critical life skills such as financial literacy, emotional intelligence, strong work ethic, and more.
- youth graduate from high school with a sense of purpose and a plan for what's next.
- there are plenty of career development programs such as job-shadowing, mentorships, apprenticeships, internships, and job opportunities for young people.
- students are connected to the community outside of school.
- youth grow up feeling hopeful, empowered, and engaged in improving their own communities and beyond.
- youth feel valued, understood, and a sense of belonging in their communities and we encourage them to believe in themselves and their future.
- we celebrate, respect, and adequately compensate the trades in Vermont.

Our communities are vibrant, supportive, and resilient because...

- adults and youth form healthy and supportive relationships and connections as mentors, role models, supporters, and caretakers.
- youth feel a sense of connection and belonging in their communities.
- people of all ages are able to meet their basic needs including housing, food, healthcare, activities, essential items, and healthy relationships.

- everyone has access to safe and affordable housing.
- well-paying jobs are available to all.
- affordable and accessible transportation is available to all.
- communities are safe and accessible for walking and biking, and for wheelchairs.
- we have robust and high-quality infrastructure including water, wastewater, housing, community buildings, broadband, and more.
- affordable, high quality childcare is available to all.
- there are public indoor and outdoor spaces available and accessible to all.
- there are fun events and activities for people of all ages.

Youth and families in Vermont are healthy and well because...

- we come together to address generational poverty, trauma, and addiction and provide families with what they need to overcome these challenges.
- we are a state where no children experience abuse.
- youth are empowered to safely engage with social media.
- youth have access to in-person opportunities to connect with peers, families, and the community.
- all youth have access to the mental health care they need and there is no stigma around accessing support and care.
- we prioritize preventative strategies around mental health challenges and substance misuse.
- we have an accessible and high-quality health care system that provides access to both urgent and longer term health care needs.

Youth feel supported, empowered, and hopeful because...

- bridges are built across generations and between the school and community.
- young people are treated like valuable members of society.
- youth are meaningfully involved in decision making in their community.
- youth voices are heard and respected.
- youth are involved in local governance, community activities, and decision making.
- programming and spaces dedicated to youth interests are available and accessible to all.
- youth of all races, cultures, abilities and disabilities, religions, sexual identities, and gender identities are represented, supported, and respected in their communities and across the state.
- communities have the tools, resources, and knowledge they need to support youth and create opportunities for youth to engage and connect with nonprofits, businesses, government, and other community groups.

Youth are connected to the land and a healthy environment because...

- schools and other community groups and organizations provide education about and connection to the food system, agriculture, and local food.
- youth spend less time on social media and screens and more time engaged with their communities and the outdoors.
- we come together to address the climate crisis and other environmental challenges.
- we value the unique assets of Vermont's natural landscape and working lands.
- we appreciate and prioritize the scenic beauty and recreational opportunities that Vermont offers.

Strategies to Achieve the Vision for Youth Success

Below is a list of strategies, identified through the Youth Opportunity Initiative public engagement process, to ensure a thriving future for Vermont Youth. These strategies are built upon the input of more than 600 Vermonters, spanning diverse ages, backgrounds, and experiences. Their collective wisdom has shaped six “threads” that, if addressed together, build a future where every young Vermonter can flourish, aspire, and achieve. While each thread is critical on its own, through this process we heard that youth are most successful when these threads are woven together and deeply rooted in equity, access, and youth leadership. By addressing these six threads together, Vermont can create a more holistic and supportive environment that nurtures the well-being and development of all individuals, particularly youth.

1

A High Quality, Flexible, Equitable, and Safe Education System

With Vermont’s unique challenges and opportunities, it is important to consider the varying needs of every student, regardless of background or circumstance, and ensure that each person has the resources and support needed to thrive. Flexibility allows for personalized learning tailored to individual needs, while safety creates an environment conducive to growth and exploration. Equity ensures that all students have access to quality education, breaking down barriers and fostering a stronger, more resilient Vermont for generations to come.

Assets and Successes

Many survey and forum participants highlighted positive experiences with the Vermont education system including skilled and caring educators who inspire youth to dream big, and who support youth as mentors and cheerleaders. Many also highlighted the value of educators and administrators that go out of their way to connect youth to the community and opportunities outside of their school. Other positive experiences with the school system included school sports, small class sizes, outdoor time integrated into the curriculum, and in-school youth-adult leadership teams that are valuable for student voice, buy-in, and a diversity of ideas.

Career and tech centers were often pointed to as key assets for Vermont youth; allowing students to access diverse careers and coaching, empowering youth with a variety of interests, and working toward more inclusion and diversity in the trades. Opportunities for early college and dual enrollment such as the Vermont State University program, Norwich University, and CCV, were also pointed to as a significant benefit to Vermont students and an affordable pathway for early career and/or higher education advancement.

Key Challenges and Gaps

- Adequate funding to meet the needs of all students while balancing costs for taxpayers. With a declining school population, higher costs of education, and limited resources, it is difficult to tailor to students’ unique needs and even to maintain the basic infrastructure and facilities needed.
- Hiring and retaining skilled educators. Low pay, housing, limited childcare, and other challenges are leading to difficulty finding and keeping skilled educators and other staff.
- A lack of safety in school due to bullying, discrimination, gun violence, and other safety concerns.

- Providing enough flexibility to meet all students interests.
- The lack of a common, long-term vision for the direction, role, and goals of Vermont’s education system

Action Recommendations for a safe and equitable education system

- **Increase access to mental health providers in schools.** Strategies could include district collaboration to scale up services, fostering partnerships with community providers, providing tele-health services, and improving policies and funding for mental health services in schools.
- **Create a statewide facility improvement fund** to renovate aging school buildings, upgrade technology and infrastructure, improve safety and security measures, and enhance accessibility for students with disabilities.
- **Provide more training, resources, and support in order to help schools more effectively execute hazing, harassment, and bullying prevention.** Scale up education and understanding to address bullying behaviors, support victims, and implement restorative justice practices so that schools can better support students and address these issues as they arise. Vermont could also enhance collaboration between schools and community or statewide partners to more effectively address hazing, harassment, and bullying behaviors.
- **Provide more opportunities for racial equity education and training** to educators, administrators, and others engaging with youth.
- **Attract, support, and retain skilled educators** by focusing on higher pay, support and training, and addressing affordable housing challenges.
- **Continue to support, fund, and elevate the community schools model.** The community schools model, a model currently implemented under 2021 Act 67, positions the school as a resource hub that provides a broad range of easily accessed, well-coordinated supports and services that help students and families address complex needs. One of the 5 pillars of this model focuses on “safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments.” The model is meant to foster a culture and climate where all students, families, and community members feel healthy, safe, and supported in achieving their learning goals.
- **Require deliberate student and adult connections in schools** so that each student has an adult advocate. This is an evidence-based practice that connects students to invaluable guidance, support, and mentorship to help navigate social, educational, and career path challenges and opportunities. Adult advocates can serve as a bridge between home and school, improving communication and collaboration to address individual needs more effectively.

2

Opportunities for Work and Life Experiences Within and Beyond the Classroom

Access to opportunities for work and life experience, both inside and outside the classroom, is crucial for the development of practical skills, exposure to different career paths, and a deeper understanding of the world beyond school. Through internships, mentoring, community service, summer/after school jobs, and more students can apply what they learn in school to real-life situations, preparing them for future careers. These opportunities foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, essential for success in the workforce and beyond. Additionally, exposure to diverse experiences encourages personal growth, empathy, and a broader perspective on life, helping to shape a next generation ready to contribute to and engage with their communities, higher education, and/or the workforce.

Key Assets and Success

In Vermont, there are a wealth of opportunities for experience in the workforce; from summer and after school jobs to service learning, apprenticeship programs, community-based learning programs in schools, family businesses, and more. Additionally, volunteering roles and engaging with community organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts, local churches, municipal committees, and more provide ways to gain critical life experiences and skills. Many recognize career and tech centers as critical hubs to expose youth to work experience and career pathways, especially in the trades. Other organizations and programs also provide this exposure such as HireAbility VT, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, Kingdom Career Connect, Advance Vermont, the Pipelines and Pathways Program at the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, and other initiatives that connect youth to a diversity of opportunities, options, and experience in the workforce.

Key Challenges

- Youth are not exposed early enough to opportunities in the trades or to a variety of career possibilities and pathways to gain experience with them.
- It is difficult to find and keep a job as a young person. Often, there is a disconnect between a student's availability and flexibility needs and the employer's expectations.
- Community-based learning in schools is often presented as an option rather than integrated into the regular curriculum or an expectation. Often academics and community-based learning are not offered together or can even conflict, making it harder to take advantage of these experiential opportunities.

Action recommendations to foster more opportunities for work and life experiences

- **Expose younger students to a variety of career opportunities and the possible pathways to access them.** Integrate career fairs, presentations, and field trips to local businesses or to visit tradespeople into elementary and middle school education. Youth should be encouraged to explore career pathways starting in elementary school with exposure continuing through middle school and high school to help support a more seamless transition to post-high school planning and experiences. This work will take a collaborative approach and could expand on and support the pilot projects of the Youth Career Exploration Subcommittee of the Afterschool and Summer Learning Advisory Committee which pairs middle school-aged youth in afterschool and summer programs with assistance, resources, and a curriculum to begin to integrate career exploration and exposure at an earlier age.

- **Scale up work-based or community-based learning opportunities in schools.** Encourage collaboration among schools, businesses, municipalities, agencies, and community organizations to identify and implement innovative approaches to career-based learning. This may include creating regional career academies, launching entrepreneurship programs, creating career-themed learning mentorships or communities of practices, and other strategies to scale up and prioritize alternative and flexible pathways for all students.
- **Lead curriculum with the development of critical work and life skills.** Transferable skills are abilities and competencies that can be applied and useful across various roles, jobs, and contexts. These skills are not specific to any particular job or industry but rather are applicable and valuable in many different situations. Examples of transferable skills include communication, such as writing and public speaking, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, teamwork and collaboration, time management, adaptability, leadership, and technological proficiency. A coalition of partners could form to explore existing models where schools are leading on this work and then create a toolkit and resources to support Vermont schools in implementing strategies to employ curriculums that lead with transferable skills. Strategies could include curriculum integration, boosting experiential learning opportunities, and professional development for educators and school administrators.
- **Scale up a training and connections program, led by the Career Exploration Subcommittee of the Afterschool and Summer Learning Advisory Committee to pair youth looking for jobs with employers that are hiring and are trained to better support young employees.** Training can support students with the skills and tools they need to succeed in first-time employment while setting up employers with the tools and resources they need to better set expectations, support youth they are employing, and foster an environment of employment as mentorship.
- **Boost transportation options.** Without adequate transportation, youth are not able to hold jobs or access flexible and alternative learning opportunities, and are therefore unable to develop the critical life skills and experiences they need to succeed. This creates a barrier to access and creates an opportunity gap between those that have transportation options and those that do not.

Kingdom Career Connect, at the Vermont State University Lyndon Campus, serves over a dozen middle schools around the Northeast Kingdom and provides 7th and 8th graders with opportunities to explore career possibilities through hands-on workshops and a STEM Fair. The day kicks off with a keynote focused on identifying career interests and building transferable skills. Industry professionals and educators help students connect the jobs they learn about to courses they could take during high school and beyond. The STEM Fair builds STEM-identity through hands-on play and a wide variety of careers. Connecting young students directly with experiential learning and professionals helps students see themselves in different careers and gives them the freedom to continue exploring interests over time. This event is produced by VSAC's GEAR UP.



<https://vsac.org/vermont-career-connect>

3

Vibrant, Supportive, and Resilient Communities

Vibrant, resilient, and connected communities provide support, opportunities to learn, and a sense of belonging for Vermont youth and ensure that the basic needs of youth are met. When young people feel connected to their community, they have a network of people who care about them and want to see them succeed. Vibrant communities offer fun activities, safe spaces, and resources for youth to explore their interests and passions. Strong, resilient communities help shape confident, compassionate, and capable young adults with positive adult connections, a sense of belonging and value, and more interest in engaging in and with their communities.

Key Assets and Success

Many aspects of Vermont communities make this a positive and supportive place for a young person to grow up. Survey and forum respondents pointed to a long list of assets including arts and humanities programs, existing youth-led spaces and teen centers such as the Bristol Hub, and community events that connect to young people such as concert series and events like Come Alive Outside in Rutland. Libraries were often highlighted as critical community resources for youth which provide access to technology, a safe place to go after school, a variety of STEM and other programming, and access to interests and information. Youth Councils and other ways to serve on municipal committees or community organizations were also highlighted as excellent opportunities when youth were able to access and participate in a meaningful way. The Community Schools model, currently piloted in several districts around the state, was also noted as a key asset to better connections between schools and communities.

Key Challenges

- Youth often feel that they are not genuinely and meaningfully engaged in decision making in their schools and communities.
- Youth in Vermont report a declining sense of belonging and connection to their community. Community connection and belonging are critical for youth, families, and individuals of all ages yet many feel a sense of disconnect especially between ages, backgrounds, income levels, and other demographic differences.
- Vermont communities are lacking foundational infrastructure to thrive including stable housing, transportation, and other infrastructure to support schools, businesses, families, and vibrancy.
- Many report feeling unsafe in their communities, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth.
- Lack of diversity of experiences, ages, and backgrounds represented in community leadership.
- There's a lack of genuine youth engagement and empowerment from adults in community leadership bodies. Many School Boards, Select Boards, and Town Committees fail to seek youth voice. Even when youth take the initiative to offer their voice in those decision-making forums, they experience dismissal or a lack of follow-up.

Action recommendations to support connected and vibrant communities

- **Increase genuine and diverse youth voice in community and school leadership bodies** by always including several youth positions on governance bodies like School Boards, Town Governance, State Governance, boards of trustees and advisory boards for non-profits and business groups. Seek ways of engaging youth on their terms and work to empower them to lead on issues they are passionate about. To do this, we need to support communities and youth with the skills they need to succeed. We could:

- **Create youth- and adult-facilitated training for community and municipal leaders** on strategies to meaningfully engage with youth and create spaces, activities, and avenues for youth participation in their community. This could be accomplished through a cohort model with VCRD's Vermont Community Leadership Network drawing in expertise from Up For Learning, Vermont Afterschool, and others. Examples could be highlighted where communities are successfully engaging youth voice such as the Brattleboro Area Youth Council, communities that have youth on boards and committees (with a vote), and other models.
- **Create Youth-led training for youth interested in getting engaged in their communities.** Work with existing youth training organizations and conduct extensive outreach to identify students who are interested in building the skills and knowledge they need to better participate in local decision-making and community volunteerism.

The Brattleboro Area Youth Council is an inspiring example of youth initiating the change they want to see in their community and doing so through long-term community engagement. BAYC is composed of up to 20 diverse youth from the Brattleboro area. They and their umbrella organization (Building a Positive Community) have made a strong effort to make the Council accessible and welcoming to youth who are BIPOC, LGBTQ+, on a tight budget, and/or have disabilities. The initial cohort of youth developed their own council structure, and the BAYC continues to meet monthly during the school year, with committees working on specific projects including increasing shared power and voice in schools, addressing community safety, and expanding youth career exploration opportunities. Thanks to the BAYC's engagement with businesses and organizations, Brattleboro is certified as a Quality Youth Development Community, a national standard of a community's engagement with and support of youth.

Building a Positive Community






Youth Council





Learn More

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youthcouncil802.org



youthcouncil802

Empowering Every Voice

- **Fund, expand, and support the community schools model in Vermont.** Several schools are implementing a model called Community Schools. These schools aren't just about classes—they serve as hubs for the whole community. They offer extra support and services for students and families, like health care, counseling, and after-school programs. Community schools work closely with local organizations and businesses to provide resources and opportunities that help students succeed in and out of the classroom. By bringing everyone together, these schools create stronger, more connected communities where everyone can thrive. In order to continue to build connections between schools and communities, we should sustain, support, and expand the community schools model statewide.
- **Increase mentorship programs for youth of all ages** to create a support system, deeper community connection, and positive role models.
- **Build support, connection, and training for parents and families.** There are many organizations and coalitions in Vermont that provide parent and family support, but many focus on youth and families in specific circumstances or facing particular challenges. Those models could be built upon to create more widely available and accessible opportunities to support parents with the tools, skills, and resources they need to better support their children, especially between the ages of 5-17. Offerings could include more structured workshops for parents and families (that are accessible and available in different languages and regions of the state) as well as support groups or drop-in opportunities to offer mutual learning and support.

4

Spaces and Activities Accessible and Welcoming to Youth and Families

Spaces and activities that are available and accessible to youth and families are essential for promoting community and peer connection, developing a sense of belonging, and providing fun and enjoyment to people of all ages. These opportunities provide a safe alternative to risky behaviors while offering avenues for friendship, engagement, skill development, and leadership. Youth are looking for places to go and things to do - in particular places and activities where they find belonging, voice, creativity, and leadership. Providing these spaces contributes to improving community vitality, mental health, and connection for all in the community. Additionally, when youth contribute to the culture and design of these spaces and programming they are learning about how they impact and influence their community at large — this is great practice to help youth understand the benefits of being positive contributors to their communities.

Key Assets and Success

Across the state, when asked to share assets and opportunities, most youth lead with activities that they love to do and places that they love to go. Many youth and adults pointed to a wide variety of programming and activities including theater and music programs, sports, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, school-run after school programs, summer camps, scouting programs, Governors Institute of Vermont, and more. Opportunities for outdoor recreation from mountain biking and skiing to skate parks, hunting, and ice skating were highlighted as key Vermont assets. Additionally, many pointed to the critical role of safe, youth-centered spaces such as the Bristol Hub, Bradford Hub, the SPACE, and other teen centers. Other spaces include libraries, local recreation centers, and more. Of critical importance are the spaces where youth are able to exercise meaningful leadership and decision-making. Several organizations around the state showcase true youth leadership and foster positive youth-adult

collaboration such as Up for Learning, Vermont Afterschool, Hardwick's Dare to be Me, and numerous other local groups and youth voice initiatives.

Key Challenges

- Most communities have few or no spaces — youth led and designed, or not — where youth can spend time, lead activities, and socialize with peers or mentors and which are also free and available on a schedule that works for youth.
- Youth spaces and activities like youth centers, afterschool programs (other than sports), and summer programs lack stable funding and are therefore more likely to be inequitably available across the state.
- Youth lack access to the existing safe and welcoming spaces and activities in their communities because they can't find transportation that is accessible or running on a good schedule for them. In some cases where public transportation is available, youth don't feel safe on that public transportation.
- Students have a lot on their plate from school to work to sports, arts, and clubs so the times when they are free often don't line up with the times when various activities or spaces are available. For example, a job at a cafe or a teen center with limited hours, or an internship available in the fall are intended to reach youth but are accessible to very few.

Action Recommendations to expand youth spaces and activities

- **Maintain a stable source of funding dedicated to youth spaces and activities.** There are limited funding sources in Vermont that can support spaces that are dedicated to youth leadership and activities - both start-up costs and the ongoing sustainability of the space and programming. The Act 78 Afterschool and Summer Grant program is a great start toward providing funding for this critical program, and the flexibility to support entities providing third space and afterschool programs. We must ensure the sustainability and flexibility of this funding source in the long-term to continue to offer and grow alternative programming models like teen centers for middle and high school aged youth.
- **Expand resources, support, and technical assistance for the start up of "third spaces" for youth.**

The Bristol Hub is a teen center funded by the Town of Bristol that has been serving the local youth since 1999. Guaranteed funding through the town allows the adults who run the center to focus on the teens, and this is critical for sustainability. It is a youth-led space, supervised by adults to ensure that it is a safe, substance-free, and positive environment. The Hub encourages and supports teens in socializing, studying, and pursuing their interests including visual arts and media, listening to music, coding, accessing the internet, and more. Through the Hub, the Bristol community has seen vulnerable youth flourishing. They learn skills, develop relationships, and become community leaders and entrepreneurs.



<https://bristolskatepark.com>

- **Expand on startup toolkits for third space** frameworks in partnership with Vermont Afterschool and other partners.
- **Continue to offer technical assistance and** workshops for startup and to support ongoing sustainability, accessibility, programming, and genuine youth engagement.
- **Explore alternative models for third spaces.** Some well-loved youth spaces are multi-use spaces that involve activities for many different affinity groups like book clubs, senior activities, sports or game nights, etc. Alternatively, youth spaces might be housed in a multi-use building where there is also a pre-school, a dentist, or co-working space, etc. This should be expanded on as a solution to lowering the costs of operating a youth center or youth activities and increase youths' sense that they belong in their community.
- **Improve transportation for access** by building on the existing variety of shared, public, and micro transit systems, and by looking for collaborative and creative solutions to increase accessibility. Even in towns with no access to shared transportation, there may be a church with a van, school buses, or businesses with vehicles. Partnerships might make new transportation options possible.

5

Outdoor Connection and Environmental Health

Connection to a healthy landscape is fundamental to the well-being and success of Vermont's youth today and into the future. By fostering a connection to the outdoors, young people can cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation for the natural surroundings that are integral to Vermont's identity and economy. Equipping youth with knowledge and skills related to environmental sustainability and outdoor stewardship not only prepares them for potential career paths in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and eco-tourism but also instills a sense of responsibility and empowerment to actively shape a more resilient and environmentally-conscious future for Vermont and beyond. Additionally, given broad environmental challenges and significant climate changes — including extreme weather events — youth are increasingly concerned about their future health and well-being. The profound impact of these challenges on youth mental health and physical well-being cannot be overlooked.

Key Assets and Success

Respondents overwhelmingly described great appreciation for Vermont's scenic landscape as a source of personal nourishment, both physically and mentally, as well as a source for economic opportunities. People of all ages point to a wealth of opportunities for outdoor recreation and connection to the land including walking trails, mountain biking networks, skiing, ice skating, swimming holes, disc golf, school gardens, local farms, and more. Recreation enables land based connection and appreciation, expands interpersonal connections, supports jobs, and improves mental and physical health. Many also highlight the hope it inspires that so many youth in Vermont are engaged with local and global environmental issues and how dedicated youth are to climate action and food systems. It was also noted that Vermont has a growing climate economy and a strong conservation sector. Many Vermont organizations are key to connecting youth to the land including the VT Youth Conservation Corps, Northwoods Stewardship Center, Upper Valley Trails Alliance, Green Mountain Club trail crews, True North Wilderness, outdoor education partnerships with public schools such as Four Winds and Educating Children Outdoors (ECO), nature centers, summer camps, and more.

Key Challenges

- Taking action on environmental issues, especially climate change, is complex and slow. The continued use of fossil fuels and inaction on climate change leads to a feeling of hopelessness and anxiety among young people in Vermont.
- It has been an immense challenge in recent years for communities and the State to recover from natural disasters and adequately prepare for more in the future. Many towns are under-resourced and need more capacity, funding, and support to improve the resilience of their infrastructure and communities. Many also point to the need for more statewide communication and coordination in emergency response and recovery.
- There is a lack of equitable access to the outdoors & place-based programming due to transportation limitations, costs, and integration with the school and community. In today's modern and phone-centric world this leads to a disconnect between young people and the outdoors.
- Many feel that we do not adequately prioritize and understand the healing and empowering benefits of a connection to land and the outdoors. This value is not adequately integrated into schools, youth activities, and other opportunities.

Action Recommendations to foster a healthy environment and connection to the outdoors

- **Prioritize and fund place-based education and programming in schools and beyond.** To do this we can integrate more outside time into the school curriculum and ensure that educators are trained with the tools and skills they need to integrate place-based education into their curriculum.
- **Ensure that all Vermont students have access to education about the environment and strategies to improve sustainability and address environmental challenges.** This could be accomplished through expanding the training of educators through programs like Shelburne Farm's many programs or the Climate Education Network. Additionally, student engagement in this type of learning is enhanced when the education is connected to place-based learning.
- **More and earlier exposure to outdoor professions** – ranging from agriculture to forestry, from land-use planning to ecotourism. Vermont's environment and working landscape is one of our greatest assets, we should ensure that Vermont students see the range of career opportunities that are available to them in these fields.
- **Continue and accelerate the current work across sectors toward addressing direct causes of climate change & environmental issues.**
 - Prioritize increasing the efficiency and resilience of our infrastructure and development.
 - Create meaningful and measurable opportunities for young adults to take climate mitigation action.

6

Health and Well-being and Access to Support

Ensuring health, well-being, and access to support for Vermont youth is paramount for their overall development and success. When young people have access to quality healthcare, mental health services, and supportive communities, they are better equipped to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Additionally, providing accessible support systems ensures that all youth, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances, have the opportunity to get the care they need to succeed.

Key Assets and Success

Vermont has recognized the critical importance of addressing youth health and wellbeing. A number of support and prevention programs bring youth the services they need including Spectrum Youth Services, school-based mental health services, the VT Youth Development Program, youth-led peer support groups, Partners for Prevention coalitions, and more. Several initiatives, such as the Healthy Relationship Project, and the Adult Responsibility Project provide training for youth, parents, services providers, educators, and others to have the tools they need to prevent and address abuse and other challenges youth may face. The State and Federal governments provide important resources to youth and their families, most notably by providing Universal School Meals to all children in the state. Additionally, there seems to be broad recognition of the importance of mental health prevention and response services and a growing number of organizations, agencies, and coalitions focusing on highlighting and addressing this critical need.

Key Challenges

- Lack of coordination, connection, and information sharing between and across agencies, organizations, and groups serving youth in Vermont. This results in difficulty accessing the right resources, getting shuffled between agencies, and programs working in silos.
- It is difficult for youth and families to find programming and resources available to them. Information about resources is scattered and it takes a great deal of time and effort to identify what is available.
- Youth are experiencing a wide array of mental health challenges and prevention and care services are limited by funding and staffing.
- Lack of awareness of the [VT Youth Declaration of Rights](#) which was drafted and signed by Vermont Youth in 2018. Not enough adults are aware of and making an effort to uphold those rights in their circles, and not enough youth are aware of their rights.
- Lack of access to healthcare — whether physical health or mental health, specialists or primary care — is hard to access for many because it is too far away. Also the systems are overburdened and understaffed, so it can take a long time to see the health care provider you need.
- Increasing mental health challenges due to climate change, global crises and violence, and exposure to bullying and violence online.

Action recommendations to improve health, wellbeing, and support

- **Expand models of Community Hubs for healthcare, social services, parental resources, education on well-being and parenting.** These models should reach the youth and families where they already are, for example a mobile clinic, or services occasionally brought to schools.
- **Build on the Project AWARE model of coordination for mental health services to create state-wide networks of coordination and collaboration.**
- **Address the shortage of mental health care providers.** Improving the system for mental health certification to make it less economically burdensome on those going through the process would be one way of increasing the number of people who can go through education and become active providers.
- **Increase transportation access** so that youth can go to health care providers, can attend events and activities that would improve their mental or physical health, and can access outdoor and community spaces where they can be active, social, and experience belonging.
- **Expand the Community Schools model** to increase access and enable a holistic approach to health and well-being for individuals and the community.



Twelve forums were held across the State. Photos shown are from forums in the northwest region and Northeast Kingdom.



Key Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Throughout the Youth Opportunity engagement process, several ideas came up many times across the various focus “threads.” When coming to action recommendations, the Advisory Group noted a set of action ideas that, if addressed, would have an impact on several or all of the critical threads for youth success. The action ideas below can be considered critical “cross-cutting” recommendations that could be efficient strategies to address all aspects of youth challenges that we heard throughout this process.

1

Expand the Community Schools Model

A community school is a comprehensive approach to education that focuses on meeting the diverse needs of students and their families by providing a wide range of academic, social, health, and recreational services within the school setting and the community. Schools using the community schools model serve as hubs for the community, offering resources such as healthcare services, counseling, adult education classes, and extracurricular activities.

After reviewing these and other success stories, the critical challenges, and action ideas, the Youth Opportunity Advisory Group saw Vermonters pointing directly to the need for community schools as well as pointing to actions and challenges that the model would likely address. These opportunities and needs bridge all six critical action threads. Implementing the community schools model in Vermont may be a key strategy to improve a wide range of factors that impact youth opportunity and well-being. This model positions the school as a resource hub that provides a broad range of easily accessed, well-coordinated supports and services that help students and families address complex needs. The model fosters a culture and climate where all students, families, and the community members feel healthy, safe, and supported in achieving their learning goals. They work closely with local organizations and businesses to provide resources and opportunities that help students succeed in and out of the classroom - and develop critical work and life skills. By bringing everyone together, these schools create stronger, more connected communities where everyone can thrive.

In 2019, the Vermont legislature passed Act 67 to support the development and implementation of the community schools model across the state.

Today, the Vermont Agency of Education and the University of Vermont are embarking on an initiative to better understand the experiences and outcomes of the schools piloting the community schools model in Vermont and the outcomes that have been achieved. It is clear that there is widespread interest in this model and momentum to continue and expand the model and all that it brings to the schools in Vermont. As we think about the future of the school system in Vermont, the community schools model touches on many values that Vermonters hold including equity, access, and opportunity for all students around the state.

2

Address Transportation

Vermonters across the state know the importance of trying to tackle one of our “stickiest” challenges in Vermont — access to public transportation options. This is a topic of conversation across most sectors — health, economic development, education, climate change mitigation, and more. It turns out that this challenge is top of mind for our state’s younger residents as well. In nearly all six of the critical threads described above, transportation came up as a key barrier to access. In our survey and community conversations, people of all ages pointed to the need for increased access to transportation for youth, educators, and parents for a long list of reasons including; access to alternative education opportunities, access to jobs and volunteer roles, the ability to join social and recreational activities, access to healthcare services, the ability to engage in their community and local decision-making, and more. Especially in our most rural communities, we must continue to identify collaborative solutions to the transportation challenge to promote equity, opportunity, well-being, and access for all youth.

3

Expand the focus on holistic mental health support for youth in schools and the community

No other single topic came up in our discussions more than mental health care and prevention of substance misuse. As we discussed challenges facing youth today, it became clear that our young people are struggling with a variety of mental health challenges, and their access to prevention and care services is limited. Youth (and the adults that work with and care for youth) described challenges around lack of motivation and self esteem, no sense of belonging in their community or among peers, lack of confidence and hope, anxiety and depression, challenges related to social media, anxiety about national and global politics and climate change, feeling that they don’t matter, and more. In order to ensure youth success and prevent long term impacts on our residents and communities, we must prevent and address these challenges.

We must take a holistic approach to prevention strategies and address all elements of youth wellbeing and support. If we prioritize prevention strategies such as awareness, education about coping mechanisms, resilience-building, deepening peer and community connection, and more, then we can equip youth with the skills needed to navigate life’s challenges effectively. At the same time, we need to ensure that we provide accessible and comprehensive mental health care so that youth in Vermont receive timely support when needed.

4

Youth voice: meaningful youth leadership and engagement in decision-making and implementation

A critical theme that we heard throughout this engagement process is the need for more and more genuine youth engagement — not just representation but deep and meaningful leadership in all aspects of this work. Many young people across the state expressed a desire to be more involved in their community, in education, and State decisions, and often expressed a feeling of being left out or engaging in marginal ways but not in actual decision making. Youth are both crucial stakeholders in the present, but also the leaders of tomorrow. In Vermont, a state known for our strong sense of community and democratic values, harnessing the energy and insights of our youth population is essential for crafting policies and initiatives that reflect the needs and aspirations of all residents. In 2022, Vermont passed Act 109 to establish the Vermont State Youth Council to engage youth voices in State decisions. This act sunsets in 2026. We must continue this and other efforts to meaningfully and deeply engage youth leadership in the decisions that shape the future of our state. By actively involving young people in identifying and implementing solutions on issues ranging across education, youth spaces and activities, climate change, the economy, and more, Vermont can foster a culture of inclusivity, empowerment, and intergenerational collaboration, ultimately paving the way for a more vibrant and equitable future for all.



Members of the Brattleboro Area Youth Council.

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- Northfield Middle & High School
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Vermont Council on Rural Development

9 Bailey Ave, PO Box 1384

Montpelier VT 05601-1384

802-223-6091 | info@vtrural.org

vtrural.org