

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, Educators, Special Education Administrators
COPY: Jeff Francis, Executive Director, VSA; Ken Page, Executive Director, VPA;
Steve Dale, Executive Director, VSBA; Martha Allen, President, VT-NEA
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education 
SUBJECT: Accountability to Our Children: ESEA and SBAC
DATE: July 27, 2015

Some of you have been following the news from Washington D.C. on efforts to fix *No Child Left Behind*. We have had a roller coaster of a spring and summer and are indebted to our Congressional delegation for its tireless advocacy on behalf of Vermont's interests. We have consulted with our Congressional teams on many issues, including:

- advocating on the specifics of the Title 1 formula which provides compensatory dollars to school districts to help them provide supports and programs that address inequities in opportunities to learn,
- advocating for more flexibility for states to develop appropriate accountability models, and a severing of the automatic use of tests to sanction schools, and
- advocating for 21C dollars that fund so many of our outstanding extended day and extended year programs for children who are living in poverty.

While the House and Senate have each passed bills, they are very different from one another. The conference committee, comprised of representatives of both bodies, will work to come up with one version to submit to the President. To become law, any compromise language will also have to avoid veto by the President. In short, we are a long way from the finish line on reauthorization. Lines have been drawn in the dirt, and we may be looking at months of negotiations, although sometimes we can be surprised. Until then, we will continue to operate under NCLB.

What does this mean for Vermont today?

Under NCLB, this year, as in preceding years, we are required to make annual determinations. In the short run, once again, NCLB requires us to label nearly every school in the state as "Needing Improvement." Given our consistent and strong performance on national and international assessments, I don't know anyone who is

spending too much time worrying about these labels anymore. We know they distract us from our important quality and equity goals. And, we know we can do better. Our commitment is to creating high quality and intellectually rich opportunities to learn, for each and every individual child.

We have worked hard to advocate for appropriate uses of assessments, and to mitigate wherever possible any inappropriate uses. In this work, we are strengthened by our State Board of Education, which issued a powerful [resolution on appropriate and inappropriate use of SBAC scores](#). In response, the Agency of Education requested a waiver from using SBAC scores to make accountability determinations as mandated by NCLB. The US ED granted this waiver for the current year, on the condition that we continue to make annual determinations based on other data.

In other words, this year's SBAC test data will NOT be used for any consequential purposes but we are still required to report results and make determinations. This means only that we will continue business as usual for another year, effectively holding course in our shared status as “needing improvement.” This gives us a year to figure out what we can and can't learn from SBAC scores. To us, the primary benefit of the scores is that they provide another data point for our conversation about the statewide gaps in achievement that we see for children who live in poverty, children with disabilities, children who are learning English, and children who are affected by historic or structural discrimination or inequities.

What does this mean for Vermont into the future?

Based on conversations with our Congressional team, our hope is that the new version of ESEA will break the automatic link between assessment and accountability, and return more responsibility to states to develop state models for accountability. If that happens, Vermont will have an opportunity to develop its own approach to ensuring that our schools are continuously working to improve teaching and learning and serve the goals of equity.

We have already begun this work. Because all schools are basically labeled as “needing improvement” in the eyes of the federal government, we are freed to move away from their definition of school quality and free to work on a more sensible use of multiple data points and professional observations to support continuous improvement of learning. I am grateful to all of you who have participated in the work around the development of Vermont's Education Quality Review (EQR) process, and excited about the opportunities this will provide for meaningful feedback and collaboration amongst educators across our systems. We will be piloting this process and using input from the field to revise the EQR process in 20 SUs or SDs in the coming year. Together, we can create some positive pressure to improve our schools, and we can share effective

strategies that we have developed to do so. Next week, we will have a webinar link where people can learn more about the EQR pilot.

Our goal at the Agency is to do our best to keep our focus on our important statewide efforts to:

- 1) better support growth and learning by every individual child, and
- 2) provide for equitable access to intellectually challenging and enriching opportunities for all of our students but especially for those who:
 - live in poverty,
 - have disabilities,
 - are learning English,
 - are “school dependent” for safety and security, and
 - are associated with structural or historic discrimination

We need ALL of our children to thrive and learn, and if there is a state with the necessary commitment to education and equity to enable them to do so, it is Vermont. We need to educate every child well in the present, so that he or she can meaningfully participate in civic life and local democracy and support his or her family into the future.

Every school I visit shares some aspect of its work about which it is proud. Almost all of them also identify some shared goal around improvement or quality of teaching on which its educators are working together. This is part of what makes me so proud to be from Vermont: we do a good job, *and* we are relentless and direct in our efforts to do *even* better. Together we can maintain our passionate commitment to improving teaching and learning in every classroom and every school, so that every child a parent entrusts to us is supported and challenged to the best of our shared ability.