

# GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE

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## A Call to Action for Vermonters to Tackle Challenges in Public Education

### INTRODUCTION

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*“The distribution of a resource as precious as educational opportunity may not have as its determining force the mere fortuity of a child’s residence.” ~ Brigham v. State of Vermont*

Vermonters agree that we have an obligation to provide our children with educational experiences that will prepare them to be successful in life. Yet today, Vermont’s educational quality varies greatly and our fiscal capacity is strained.

Vermont’s small size presents us with a tremendous opportunity to have among the finest public education systems in the world – one that responds to the unique needs and interests of every child, and at a cost Vermont taxpayers can afford. **Now** is the time to seize that opportunity.

The Green Mountain Imperative is a call to action for Vermonters to roll up their sleeves and tackle the challenges facing Vermont public education. It was launched to mobilize action to accomplish this charge among a broad cross-section of stakeholders. For two full days, 200 educational leaders and stakeholders were exposed to in-depth analysis of our most pressing issues. Participants committed to leave personal and political agendas at the door, and ground discussion in clear data and a common dedication to quality learning for every Vermont child.

The Summit brought many important perspectives and issues to light. Amidst much rich discussion and lively debate, **one truth emerged:**

**Public education in Vermont has reached a turning point. We must move forward with solutions that will give every Vermont student access to quality learning at a cost our state can afford.**

**Every child matters**, and in Vermont, we have a constitutional duty to ensure that every child has access to equal educational opportunity. Our collective charge is to find new and better ways to organize Vermont’s public education system in a manner that is collaborative across sectors and that benefits our children, our communities and our economy.

### OUR GOALS ARE CLEAR

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In Vermont, a great deal of work has been done to define our expectations for high quality learning. From the State Board of Education, through its ground-breaking Education Quality Standards (EQS), to the General Assembly through its enactment of universal Pre-K and flexible pathways legislation, to school districts across the state implementing new and innovative strategies to support learning, Vermont is poised to take public education in a bold new direction, where learning is personalized, relevant, and technology-rich. These policies and practices are grounded in research and have broad stakeholder investment. If we are able to realize their promise, we stand to make Vermont’s public education system the best in the nation.

At the Green Mountain Imperative Summit, participants agreed that our challenge is not to define what quality looks like. **Our challenge is to ensure that our system delivers quality learning in an equitable and affordable way.**

Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education, articulates the following common goals:

1. To ensure all children develop the skills they need to thrive in both their career and civic life.
2. To provide this education in the most effective, accountable and affordable way.
3. To assure equity of opportunities and outcomes across the state.

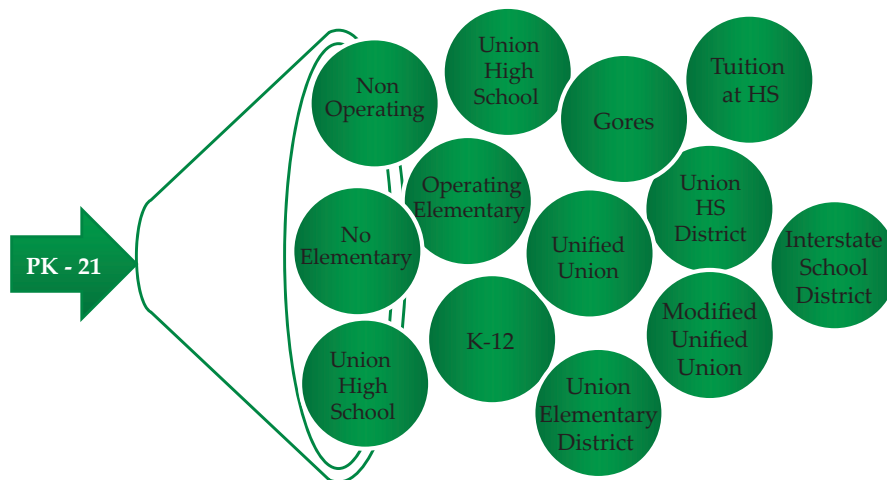
## A SYSTEM BUILT FOR ANOTHER TIME

Our education system was created to respond to the needs of children and families in the 19th century Industrial Age, and now struggles to keep up with the changing learning environment brought about by the Information Age of the 21st. Many of the jobs our children will hold have not even been invented yet. Technology has changed how our children learn, the tools available for teaching, and the skills they will need for the future.

We have a complex organizational structure governing our education system that may have been able to respond sufficiently in a historic context but is now both inefficient and ineffective in delivering a 21<sup>st</sup> Century education. We know that every district is not similarly situated in their ability to provide high-quality student-centered learning opportunities to every child. This inconsistency is a manifestation of both fragmented governance and uneven operational capacity.

Our system was built in a time when we did not have ambitious goals for every student, and we did not know much about how students learn. As student needs have become more complex and the demands on our public education system have grown, our systems must become more adept at responding to those demands and better able to manage resources.

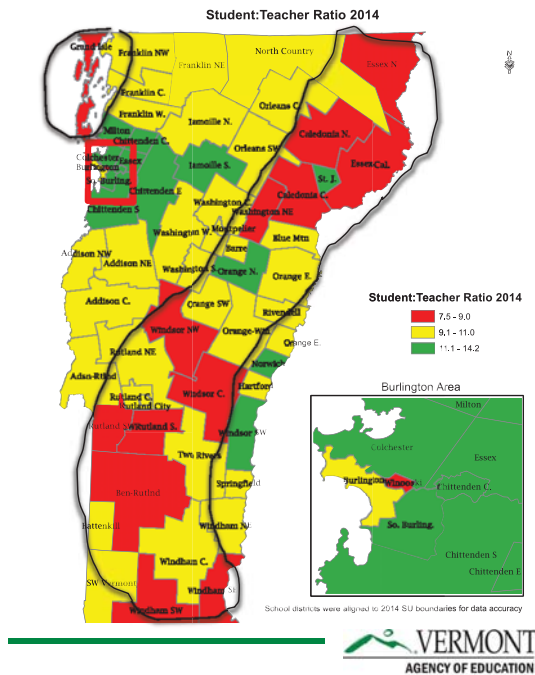
### 13 Current Forms of School Governance



Our system was created in a time when we had more students spread out over a wider geographic area. Since 1997, Vermont's student population has fallen by more than 20%. This population trend is hitting certain parts of the state harder than others, resulting in very small class sizes and inefficient use of educational resources in those communities.

**Student-to-Teacher Ratio 7.5-9.0**

*Student enrollment is down over 20% since 1997  
Staffing figures have remained relatively constant over that same time period*



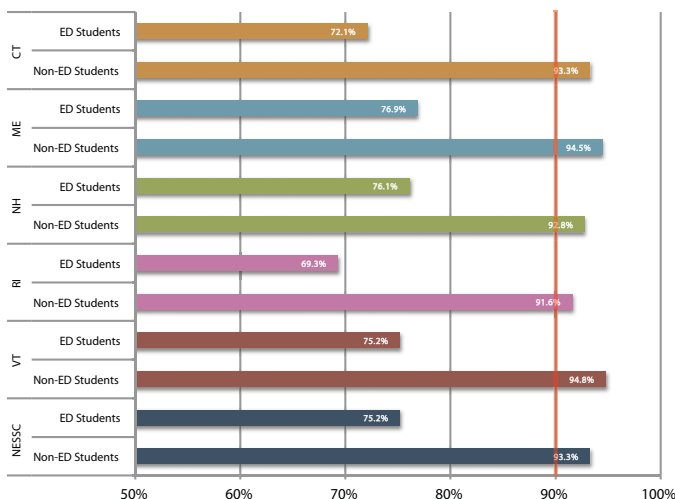
Our system was built in a time when we did not expect to measure student learning through the use of comprehensive assessment tools designed to inform and improve instruction in the classroom. Yet in too many of our school districts, we do not have performance data on student outcomes because the size of the student population is too small. We also do not have systems in place to improve teaching through coordinated professional development and educator quality evaluations. This lack of information on student and educator performance leaves many of our schools with limited accountability to their students and communities.

**ALL STUDENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO QUALITY LEARNING**

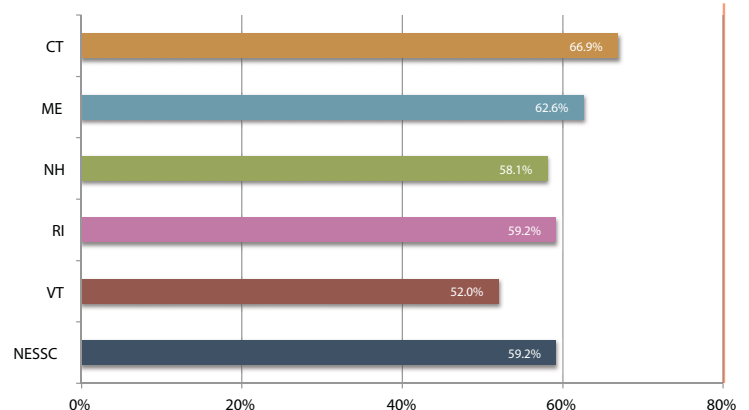
*“Quality learning shouldn’t depend on what town a student lives in or what teacher he gets.”*

When compared to other states, Vermont's education system ranks high. In certain areas however, we do not do well enough. While we have among the best high school graduation rates in the country, we know that there are too many students who fall short of their potential or slip through the cracks because they are not fully engaged in their education or because they face significant barriers due to socioeconomic status, language or disability.

**2013 Graduation Rates: Economically Disadvantaged Students**



**2013 College Enrollment**



Source: NESSC Common Data Project 2014 Annual Report



## Our schools have to be able to prepare our children to thrive in the world that awaits them.

To ensure that all of our children can acquire the knowledge and skills essential to succeed, they need access to new, more diverse and personalized learning opportunities. This is our collective commitment and one that we cannot shy away from. We are no longer simply preparing our children for life and work within the borders of a town but for success in their region, state, nation and beyond.

Yet despite this collective commitment, we are seeing increasing inequity across the state driven by lack of scale. School districts investing equivalent sums of money per pupil are adding educational opportunities for students in places where there is scale - and cutting programs and reducing education quality in places where there is not.

We know that high quality, sustained leadership is essential to improving educational outcomes for all students. Yet in Vermont, we face a significant leadership challenge. More than 30% of our principals turn over on a given year. In 2014, 30% of superintendents left their positions.

## Scale affects the breadth of opportunities you can provide onsite for the same per pupil expenditure.

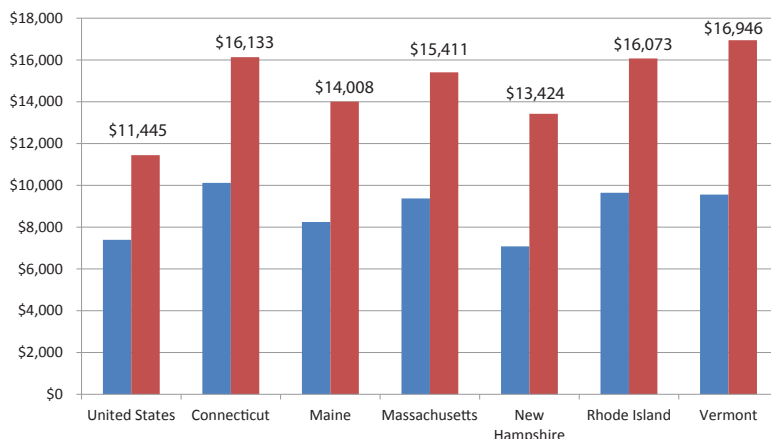
<p>Science at School A (300 Students)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Earth Science</li> <li>Biology</li> <li>Biology - Other</li> <li>Chemistry</li> <li>Physics</li> <li>AP Physics B</li> <li>AP Environmental Science</li> <li>Technical Science</li> <li>Life and Physical Sciences - Proficiency Development</li> <li>Life and Physical Sciences - Independent Study</li> </ul>	 	<p>Science at School B (80 Students)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biology</li> <li>Physical Science</li> <li>Forensics</li> </ul>
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## THE COST OF PUBLIC EDUCATION MUST BE SUSTAINABLE

Vermont has one of the highest per-pupil spending rates in the country, a reflection of the state's tremendous commitment to public education and our inability to respond to our changing demographic trends. Indeed, given our declining student population, Vermont's taxpayers are questioning why we continue to see rising costs that outpace the growth of our economy.

### Current Expenditure Per Enrolled Pupil FY'00, FY'10



Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2012

Over the past decade, our expenditure per student has risen at a rate of over 8% a year. By contrast, our economy has grown at a rate of less than 1% per year.

In 2014, 37 budgets were defeated by local voters. In the 2014 election, property tax rates were the main concern of voters. The General Assembly has identified education costs and funding as the priority issues heading into the 2015 session.

## EMERGING PRIORITIES

In an era of increased expectations, knowledge about what students need to succeed, and limited financial resources, the question becomes: how can Vermonters redesign our system to ensure we fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity at a reasonable cost?

To respond to that challenge, Green Mountain Imperative Summit participants were asked to spend two days developing concrete recommendations for action through dialogue and deliberation. Participants identified six areas to focus our collective attention:

- Building student-centered learning systems,
- Establishing new accountability and metrics for evaluating school systems,
- Simplifying education governance,
- Establishing a sustainable funding system,
- Creating a 0-20 education continuum, and
- Tackling poverty through greater education and human services integration.

A thorough review of the specific recommendations and post-summit action steps developed for each area are provided in the Appendix of the report. Among the most popular areas of focus are simplifying education governance (72.3%), building student-centered learning systems (47.5%), and establishing a sustainable funding system (45.5%).

## NEXT STEPS FOR THE IMPERATIVE

**CREATE THE GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE COALITION:** Using a coalition model, GMImperative partners will establish a plan to meet on a quarterly (more frequently, as needed) basis to serve as a convening body for post-Summit accountability, communications, and follow-through. This body could also serve as the convener for future, topic-specific GMImperative gatherings designed to inform legislation, policy, and various summit recommendations – consistent with the solutions and proposals provided by the working groups.

**ESTABLISH WORKING GROUPS:** for the three top priority areas identified by Summit participants; identify and engage a minimum of two (2) Co-Leads per working group. These working groups would serve as the basis for turning recommendations into action. These working groups could be supported by Coalition members, other leaders that emerged at the Summit, and could include other experts in that priority area.

**BUILD PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES:** Establish a team to build the GMImperative narrative and broaden statewide awareness and interest in the data, building on the momentum already begun. This team will create a communications strategy and delegate key roles for sharing updates via email, web, social media, and press. These communications will create energy for local community conversations statewide in ways that elevate awareness of the “State of VT Public Education” data and shift how key stakeholders think and talk about public education solutions in response to the urgency for change – local and systemic.

***“We are in this - and willing to work – together.”***

***“We need to keep students at the focus of our discussions, not politics.”***

***“Vermonters are demanding change; they must be part of designing the solution.”***

***“I made connections with leaders of several key organizations and have already pursued follow-up conversations. I will be hosting listening sessions with the leaders...in my district. We MUST continue to build on the movement that this summit has begun.”***

**~ Green Mountain Imperative Summit Participants**