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MEMORANDUM

TO: Parents and Caregivers
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Vermont's Commitment to Continuous Improvement
DATE: August 6, 2014

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), as of 2014, if only one child in your school does not score as "proficient" on state tests, then your school must be "identified" as "low performing" under federal law. This year, every school whose students took the NECAP tests last year is now considered a "low performing" school by the US Department of Education. A small group of schools were not affected by this policy this year because they helped pilot the new state assessment and so did not take the NECAPs last year. Because these schools had their federal AYP status frozen at 2013 levels, eight schools are not yet identified as low performing by federal criteria. However, had these school taken the NECAPs as well, it is likely that every single school in the state would have to be classified as "low performing" according to federal guidelines.

The Vermont Agency of Education does not agree with this federal policy, nor do we agree that all of our schools are low performing.

In 2013, the federal Education Department released a study comparing the performance of US states to the 47 countries that participated in the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, one of the two large international comparative assessments. Vermont ranked 7th in the world in eighth-grade mathematics and 4th in science. Only Massachusetts, which has a comparable child poverty rate, did better.

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Vermont consistently ranks at the highest levels. We have the best graduation rate in the nation and are ranked second in child well-being.

Just this week, a social media company that compares financial products (WalletHub) analyzed twelve different quality metrics and ranked Vermont's school system third in the nation in terms school performance and outcomes.

Nevertheless, if we fail to announce that each Vermont school is "low performing," we jeopardize federal funding for elementary and secondary education. The "low performing" label brings with it a number of mandatory sanctions, which your principal is required to explain to you.

This policy does not serve the interest of Vermont schools, nor does it advance our economic or social well-being. Further, it takes our focus away from other measures that give us more meaningful and useful data on school effectiveness.

It is not realistic to expect every single tested child in every school to score as proficient. Some of our students are very capable, but may have unique learning needs that make it difficult for them to accurately demonstrate their strengths on a standardized test. Some of our children survived traumatic events that preclude good performance on the test when it is administered. Some of our students recently arrived from other countries, and have many valuable talents but may not yet have a good grasp of the academic English used on our assessments. And, some of our students are just kids who for whatever reason are not interested in demonstrating their best work on a standardized test on a given day.

We know that statewide, our biggest challenge is finding better ways to engage and support the learning of children living in poverty. Our students from families with means and parents with more education, consistently are among the top performing in the country. However, federal NCLB policy has not helped our schools improve learning or narrow the gaps we see in our data between children living in poverty and children from more affluent families. We need a different approach that actually works.

What are the alternatives? Most other states have received a waiver to get out from under the broken NCLB policy. They did this by agreeing to evaluate their teachers and principals based on the standardized test scores of their students. Vermont is one of only 5 states that do not have a waiver at this time. We chose not to agree to a waiver for a lot of reasons, including that the research we have read on evaluating teachers based on test scores suggests these methods are unreliable in classes with 15 or fewer students, and this represents about 40-50% of our classes. It would be unfair to our students to automatically fire their educators based on technically inadequate tools. Also, there is evidence suggesting that over-relying on test-based evaluation might fail to credit educators for doing things we actually want them to do, such as teach a rich curriculum across all important subject areas, and not just math and English language arts. In fact, nation-wide, we expect more and more states to give up these waivers for many of the reasons we chose not to pursue one in the first place.

Like other Vermont educators, I am deeply committed to continuously improving our schools and the professional skill of our teachers. I have heard from principals and teachers across the state who are deeply committed to developing better ways of teaching and working with parents and other organizations to ensure that every child's basic needs are met. If basic needs are not met, children cannot take advantage of opportunities that we provide in school. However, the federal law narrows our vision of schools and what we should be about. Ironically, the only way a school could pass the NCLB criteria would be to leave some children behind – to exclude some of the students who come to our doors. That is something public schools in Vermont will not do.

Matching our Measures to our Purpose

Certainly, we know tests are an important part of our tool kit, but they do not capture everything that is important for our children to learn. With this in mind, our State Board of Education clearly outlined five additional education priorities in our new Education Quality Standards, including scientific inquiry, citizenship, physical health and wellness, artistic expression and 21st century transferable skills.

As parents and caregivers, we embrace a broader vision for our children than that defined in federal policy. Thus, we encourage you to look at your own child's individual growth and learning, along with evidence your school has provided related to your child's progress. Below are some questions to consider:

- What evidence does your school provide of your child's growing proficiency?
- Is your child developing the skills and understanding she needs to thrive in school and the community?
- Are graduates of your school system prepared to succeed in college and/or careers?
- Is your child happy to go to school and engaged in learning?
- Can your child explain what he is learning and why? Can your child give examples of skills he has mastered?
- Is your child developing good work habits? Does she understand that practice leads to better performance?
- Does your child feel his work in school is related to his college and career goals?
- Does your child have one adult at the school whom she trusts and who is committed to her success?
- If you have concerns, have you reached out to your child's teacher to share your perspective?

Be engaged with your school, look at evidence of your own child's learning, and work with your local educators to ensure that every child is challenged and supported, learning and thriving. Schools prosper when parents are involved as the first teachers of their children.

The State's Obligation to Our Children

Working with the Governor, the State Board, the General Assembly and other agencies, and most importantly, with educators across the state, the Agency of Education will invite schools across the state to come together to innovate and improve our schools. We hope your school will volunteer to help develop and use a variety of other measures that will give parents, citizens and educators better information on student learning and what we can do to personalize and make it better. These measures include:

- collaborative school visits by teams of peers, to support research, professional learning and sharing of innovative ideas,
- personalization of learning through projects and performance assessments of proficiency,

- gathering and sharing of feedback from teachers, parents and students related to school climate and culture, student engagement and opportunities for self-directed learning,
- providing teachers and administrators standards-based feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction,
- developing personalized learning plans that involve students in defining how they will demonstrate they are ready to graduate, and basing graduation on these personalized assessments of proficiency rather than “seat-time”,
- analyzing growth and improvement at the Supervisory level as well as the school level, to identify systems that seem to be fostering greater growth in students, as a way of identifying and sharing promising practices across schools.

Vermont has a proud and distinguished educational history, but we know we can always do better. We are committed to supporting our schools as they find more effective and more engaging ways to improve the skills and knowledge of our children. As we have done before, we intend to draw on the tremendous professional capability of teachers across the state as we work to continuously improve our schools. Our strength has always been our ingenuity and persistence. In spite of federal policies that poorly fit the unique nature of Vermont, let's continue to work together to build great schools that prepare our children to be productive citizens and contributors to our society.