



# EDUCATION MATTERS:

## THE IMPACTS OF SYSTEMIC INEQUITY IN VERMONT



# INTRODUCTION

*Public education is the foundation of democracy, and as teachers, we know it is our moral imperative to make it available to every child, starting in the formative years. Especially in an age of vast inequity, increases in childhood poverty, and more students who have experienced trauma, we need to prepare our young people to be able to participate in a democratic society and meet future challenges that await them with strength of character, confidence, and a sense of justice.*

*Yes, we teach content like literacy and math, but we also teach children to cultivate their interests and develop their aspirations beyond high school. We teach them the lifelong skills of problem-solving, collaboration, and respecting differences. We build strong relationships with students and their families and earn their trust and partnership through our daily efforts within and outside of our school day. Teachers, working with communities to address systemic inequities, have a chance to help level the playing field, to realize our goal of providing the best possible education to all students, affirm a student's sense of self-worth, and help make their dreams a reality.*

-Rebecca Haslam, 2015 Vermont Teacher of the Year

Vermonters have many reasons to be proud of our education system. Our students score among the highest on national tests in math and reading. We have one of the most progressive school-funding systems in the country—one that demonstrates our commitment to equal access to education for students statewide, regardless of the income-base or property wealth of the town they live in. We are increasing access to pre-kindergarten (pre-K), school meals, and out of school programs so that kids have the foundations they need to start school on strong footing. At the same time, we are setting new standards that seek to ensure equitable learning opportunities as well as college and career-readiness by setting high expectations for all students. We have set ambitious goals, tying high school graduation to student skill (proficiency), personalizing learning and increasing access to college courses.

Yet income inequality continues to rise across the state. Although the gross state product rose 6 percent since 2004, after adjusting for inflation, median incomes have gone down by 7 percent, and low-wage workers saw the biggest wage drop. The top 1 percent of Vermonters earned over 13 percent of the income in 2013.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, nearly one in six Vermont children are poor.<sup>2</sup> Striking inequalities across race, class, and (dis)ability in our schools are part of these larger trends, and the growing disparities that our children see in their homes and communities are mirrored in the schools they attend.

Children from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students of color score worse on standardized tests, are more likely to be suspended or expelled, are less likely to graduate on time, and are less likely to reach college or career-readiness, go to college, and graduate from college. Schools cannot bear full responsibility for these disparate outcomes. Vermont, like the rest of the country, continues to see child and family poverty rates rise, and more and more kids are coming to school without the basic resources they need to be ready to learn.

The persistent Myth of the Meritocracy<sup>3</sup> can cloud our attempts to understand and intervene in the ever-present and growing gaps that our children face both in school and out. In this report, we will examine the negative impacts of rising inequality for all of Vermont's students by taking a closer look at standardized tests, data collection, school size, disciplinary practices, out-of-school time, and graduation rates.

# EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

*An equal education system believes that everyone should get the same education—we are a far cry from even this seemingly simple principle. An equitable education believes that people should receive an education specific to their needs, as defined by their circumstances. If we were to reach the point where we had an equal education system, we would certainly have to admit that people of privilege (economic, racial, political, social) will, more often than not, provide their children with advantages beyond the institution of school that cannot be matched by those without privilege. Although we would be in a better place as a society if schools were at least equal, the inequalities of this system would still provide a moral challenge to our society.*

*An equitable school system would... provide service on the basis of the specific needs (social, economic, linguistic, political) of the people being served. This would not mean less or more, but different, such that the resources and the pedagogy would match the specific needs of the community.... It is a movement away from educational practices that primarily measure student achievement on the basis of assimilation into white middle-class norms.... An equitable education system would nurture students' own cultural identities and promote the use of their school success in the service of their communities.*

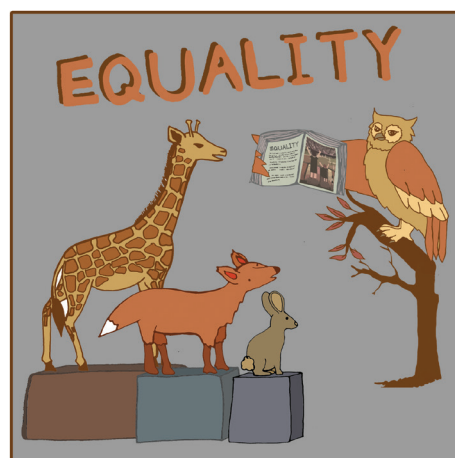
-Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade  
and Ernest Morrell,  
*The Art of Critical Pedagogy*<sup>4</sup>

Much of the momentum for national standardization in testing and curricula is based on the assumption that we must strive toward equality, that “a level playing field” will give every child a fair chance. But not every child needs the same resources or support to succeed in school, and an equity-based approach requires accommodating differences as well as distributing resources (from extra classroom attention to free and reduced price meals) according to need. Equity requires treating students as individuals while understanding the contexts and communities they come from. It also means holding all students to high expectations, offering meaningful opportunities regardless of where they come from.

In this report we look at the newest data tracking educational achievement in the state, and ask: Who is our educational system for, and who does it leave behind? How does our educational system work to disenfranchise some students while favoring those who come to school with more resources and support?

We know that strong relationships between students and teachers are essential to student engagement and academic achievement<sup>5</sup> We know that parent and community involvement in schools increases equity.<sup>6</sup> We know that out-of-school time strongly impacts inequality and child wellbeing. We know that schools play important roles in the stability of rural communities<sup>7</sup>

The following data look at how community-oriented and systemic approaches can support more equitable schools. From unequal exclusions and unfair playing fields to out-of-school programs and income supports for working families, we highlight the challenges Vermont faces and the pathways to success for all of our young people.



*We can't substantially change opportunity without changing the actual lived circumstances of disadvantaged and working-class youth.*

-Laurence Mishel<sup>8</sup>

## WHY DOES INEQUALITY MATTER?

Vermont children consistently score higher on standardized tests and graduate at higher rates than their peers nationwide. Some may argue, then, that even our lowest-performing students are better off than most kids in the country.

Beyond our assertion that the national bar is set too low, we also point to significant evidence that **inequality itself reduces mobility and worsens the health and wellbeing of everyone in society.**

Infant mortality is higher, life expectancy is lower, and health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries.<sup>9</sup>

A family's income rank (that is, income compared to others in their community) is an important predictor of a child's academic achievement.<sup>10</sup>

Rising income inequality is increasing residential segregation nationwide,<sup>11</sup> which is correlated with worse outcomes for students in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>12</sup>

Even those of higher status are worse off in communities with high rates of inequality: they are less likely to be happy, have lower capacity for empathy, and feel less connection to others around them.<sup>13</sup>

# THE VALUE & LIMITATIONS OF TESTING

School testing has been the topic of fierce debate in recent years. Much criticism centers on the ways in which tests have become the primary mechanism for measuring school and teacher quality. The high-stakes nature of these tests means that teachers and schools often feel pressure to “teach to the test,” students can find themselves being tested multiple times a year,<sup>14</sup> and in some states, educators are finding their pay linked to student test scores, a strong disincentive for experienced educators to remain in low-performing school districts.<sup>15</sup>

But as backlash against extreme testing grows, many advocates stress the importance of measuring student achievement in order to help us see and track disparities in our educational systems. A May 2015 statement from The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights explains the importance of consistent and accurate data collection:

*For the civil rights community, data provide the power to advocate for greater equality under the law.... There are some legitimate concerns about testing in schools that must be addressed [such as] over-testing, cultural bias in tests, and the misuse of test data. At the heart of that debate is whether or not we will have the courage to make the necessary investments in each and every child, no matter their race, ethnicity, class, disability status, or first language. But we cannot fix what we cannot measure. And abolishing the tests or sabotaging the validity of their results only makes it harder to identify and fix the deep-seated problems in our schools.<sup>16</sup>*

*We cannot fix what we cannot measure.*

Rather than raising the stakes for teachers and students, tests should be a tool of empowerment for students, families and communities. Regular testing ought to allow us to illustrate clearly the costs of defunding essential school programs, to better understand who is left behind in our schools, and to make visible the larger societal inequities that are mirrored and sometimes deepened in our schools.

# PERSISTENT GAPS

Vermont students rank among the highest in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Every testing year since 2000, Vermont students have scored above national averages in both math and reading assessments.

But gaps between low-income students<sup>18</sup> and their peers are substantial. Only 27 percent of fourth graders who were eligible for free/reduced-price school meals scored at proficiency levels on the math assessment, while 55 percent of their peers scored at this level. By eighth grade, the gap shrunk by just 3 percent. The gap was only slightly smaller in reading assessments, where 30 percent of low-income fourth graders scored at proficiency levels, compared to 55 percent of their higher-income peers.<sup>19</sup>

Further, the bar is set too low. It is important to note that while Vermont is among the top scoring states, more than half of our students read below the NAEP-defined proficiency level: only 45 percent of fourth graders and 44 percent of eighth graders read above a basic level.

Additionally, in a state where more than 1 in 3 children live in low-income families,<sup>20</sup> we must do more to ensure that our schools educate all of our children, providing them with the skills and support they need to thrive.

*Without significant societal changes such as greater levels of income and wealth equality, more equitable access to high-quality healthcare, and wider access to affordable housing and affordable childcare, we ultimately cannot eliminate the opportunity gap that perpetuates the achievement gap.*

*-Paul C. Gorski<sup>17</sup>*

In this report, we rely on data from three different statewide assessments. Each test seeks to measure student proficiency in math, science, or English/language arts. Results are reported at the school and/or state level, and list subject-matter achievement by grade level as well as sub-groups such as by race, gender, disability, or family income.

In past reports, we have used proficiency data from the **New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP)** test, which was

administered from 2005-2014. The tests, developed in response to the Federal No Child Left Behind Act, were designed to measure students' achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics.

In the 2014-2015 school year, the state began shifting to **Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)** test for English/Language Arts and Math, but will continue to use the NECAP test to measure proficiency in the sciences. During the 2013-2014 school year, 27 schools across the state

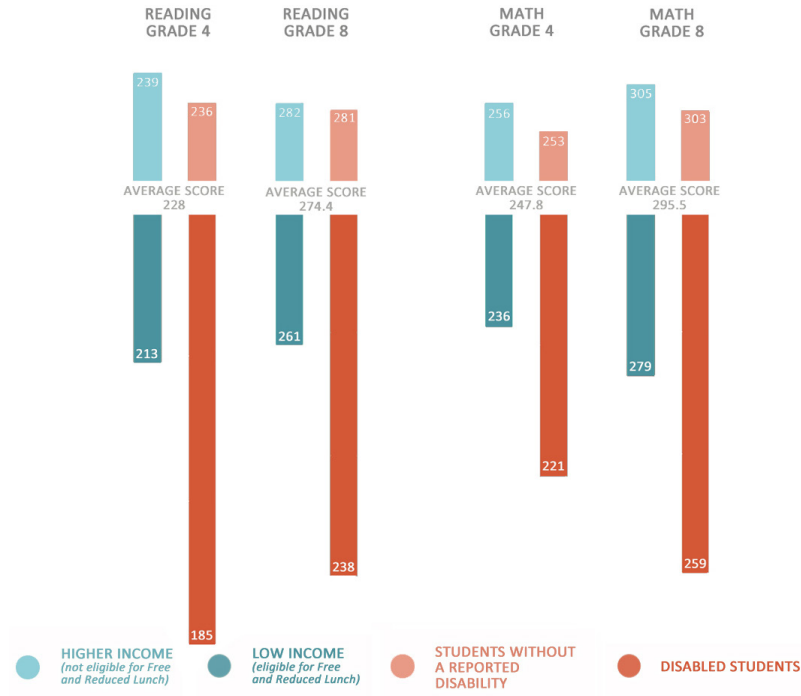
chose to use the SBAC test rather than NECAP.

The **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** tests, often referred to as "The Nation's Report Card," are the only assessments that allow us to compare Vermont to national student performance and trends. These tests are administered every two years to a sample of 4th and 8th graders in each school. Data is not available for individual schools, but is aggregated at the state level.



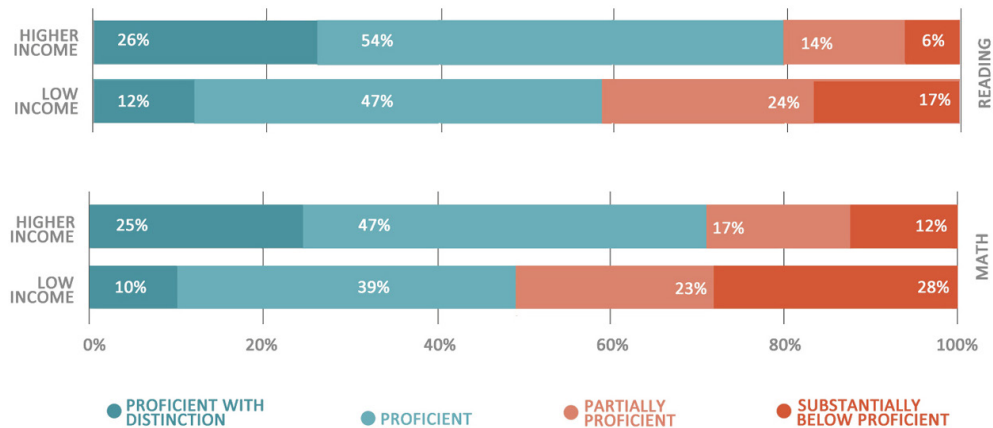
## GAPS IN READING AND MATH 2013 NAEP DATA, GRADES 4 & 8

Average scores for low-income and disabled students are well below their peers.



SOURCE: Vermont Agency of Education, Reading and Mathematics Snapshot Reports, 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

## INCOME-BASED PROFICIENCY GAPS 2013 NECAP ASSESSMENTS, GRADES 3-8



\* LOW INCOME STUDENTS are those eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL). HIGHER INCOME STUDENTS are those who are not FRL-eligible.

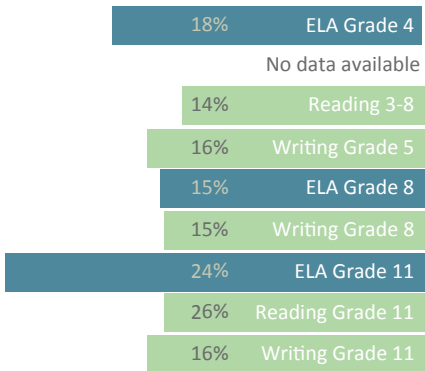
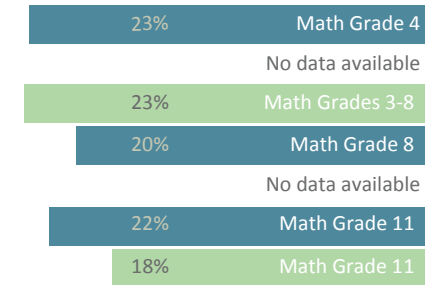
SOURCE: Vermont Agency of Education, Reading, Mathematics, Writing, & Science: 2013 New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). For the 2013-2014 school year, 27 schools participated in the SBAC field test in lieu of administering the fall NECAP assessments, which makes statewide results unrepresentative of all students in the state.

## RACE & INCOME-BASED GAPS

While scores and proficiency levels vary widely from test to test, the gap between students scoring at or above proficiency is comparable across assessment tools. The racial achievement gap averages about 18 percent, while the income achievement gap averages 25 percent.

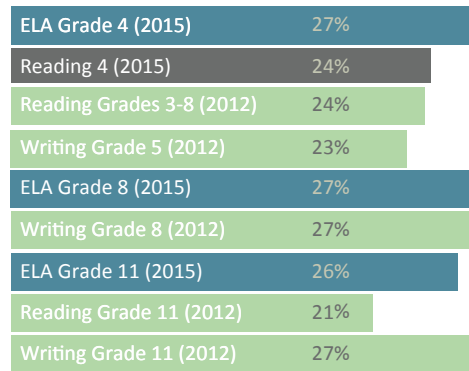
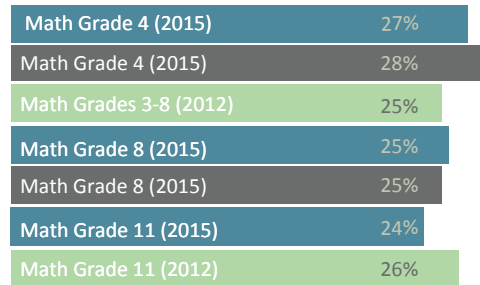
### BLACK-WHITE EQUITY INDEX

*Difference between percentage of black and white students scoring at proficiency level on three standardized tests.*



### FAMILY INCOME EQUITY INDEX

*Difference between percentage of FRL-eligible and non-eligible students scoring at proficiency level on three standardized tests.*



Smarter Balanced

NECAP

NAEP



# SCHOOL SIZE

Vermont’s public schools have been declining in enrollment for more than fifteen years. Since a peak in 1997,<sup>21</sup> the total number of students has decreased by about 1 percent per year. Amidst debates about the cost of education in the state, dozens of proposals for consolidations have been put forward.

Advocates for consolidation argue that larger schools and districts are more cost-effective and can provide a greater variety of classes and extracurricular activities, leveling the educational opportunities for Vermont’s students. But others worry that consolidation erodes local control, civic engagement, and investment in schools without providing better educational opportunities for all students.

While larger schools may, in theory, offer more educational and extracurricular options, a smaller portion of the student body is likely to take advantage of these resources.<sup>22</sup> Whether it is long bus rides for some students, limited enrollment capacity, or “tracking” students into different curriculum offerings, more options do not necessarily correlate to more equitable schools.<sup>23</sup>

Larger schools do not necessarily benefit all students equally, and in fact report larger achievement gaps than their smaller counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Average NECAP test scores for all students vary little by school size, but elementary and middle school students show smaller income-based proficiency gaps in smaller schools. On the math assessment for grades 3-8, small schools averaged a 22 percent proficiency gap, 20 percent smaller than the average for all school sizes. On the reading assessment, small schools reported a 22 percent gap while the average for all schools is close to 25 percent, or a 13 percent larger gap.<sup>25</sup>

A report by the Rural School and Community Trust<sup>26</sup> argues that measuring cost-per pupil by cost-per-graduate shows that small schools are worth the investment. Indeed, students statewide are much less likely to drop out of small schools than larger ones. The dropout rate in Vermont’s largest schools is nearly 15 times higher than in the smallest ones.<sup>27</sup>

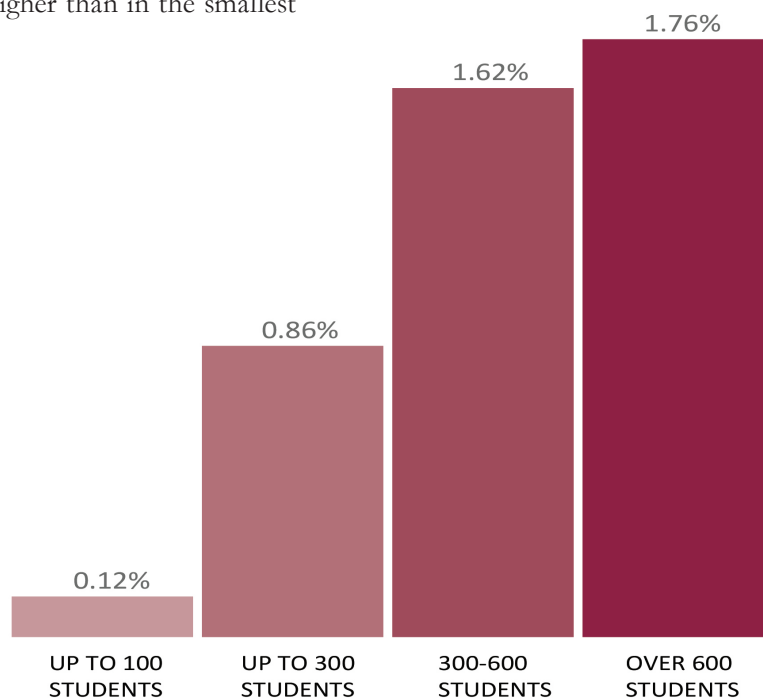
*Small schools are frequently the glue that binds together small communities, serving as their economic and social hub. Small villages that lose their schools lose more than a building—they lose their collective cultural and civic center.*

-Lorna Jimerson<sup>28</sup>

*Put simply, the loss of a school erodes a community’s social and economic base—its sense of community, identity and democracy—and the loss permanently diminishes the community itself.*

-Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson, and Jennifer Petrie, Ohio University<sup>29</sup>

## DROPOUT RATE BY SCHOOL SIZE

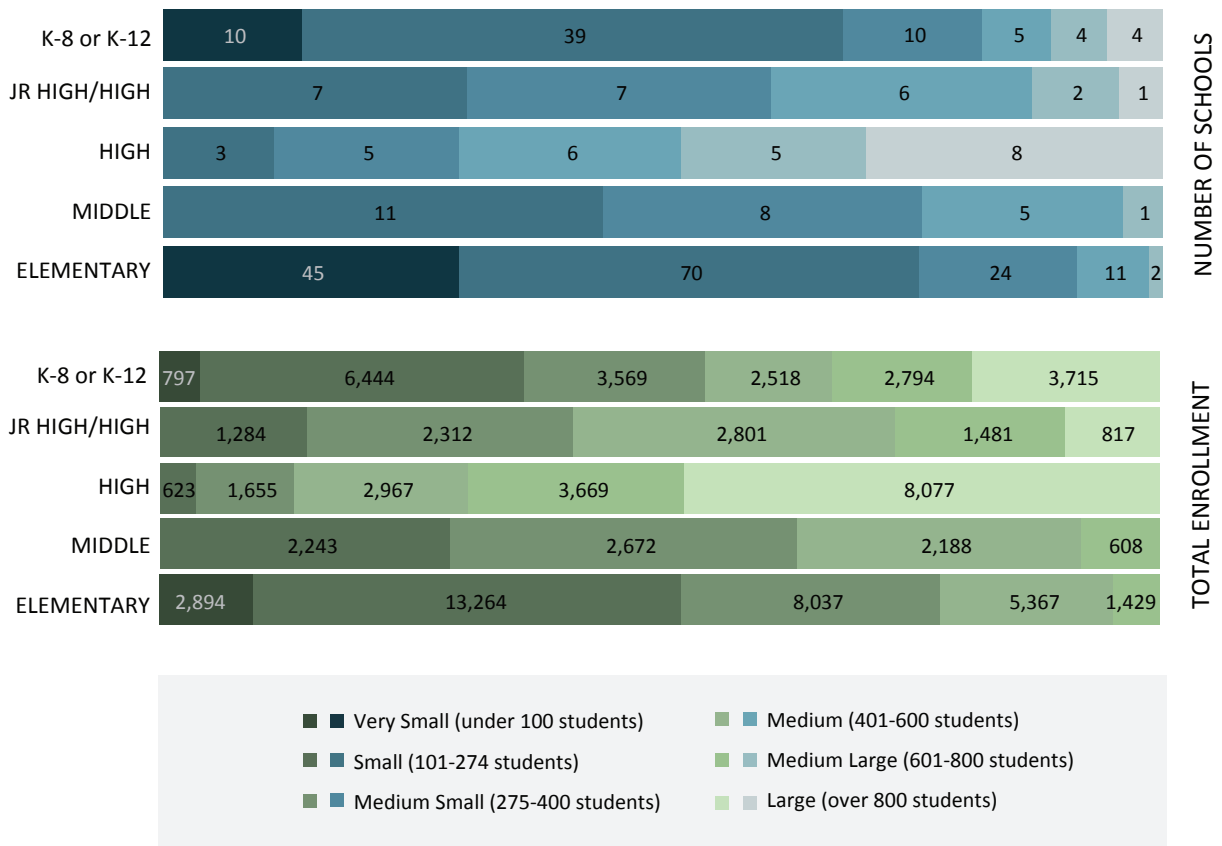
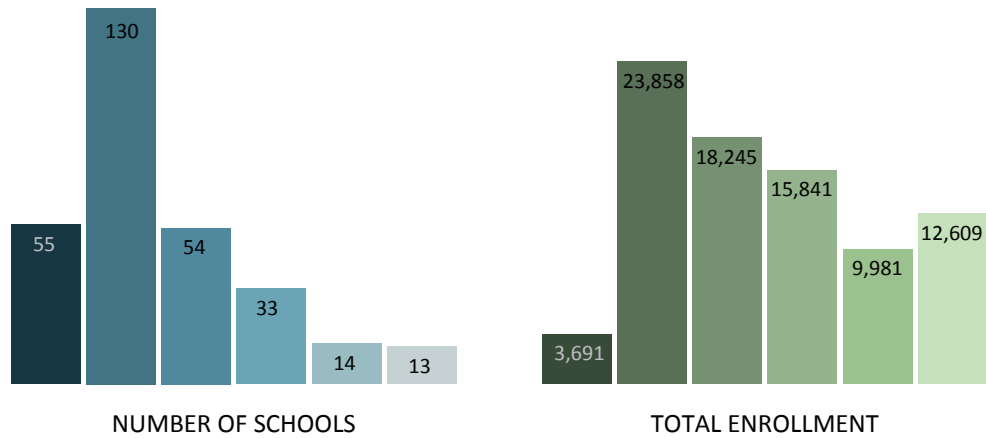


SOURCE: Vermont Agency of Education, 2013-2014 Dropout & High School Completion Report Table 4 (Dropout Rates by School) & Table 6 (Event and Cohort Graduation Rate), 9-12th Graders.

## SCHOOL SIZE BY GRADE LEVEL

Most small schools in the state are elementary schools. Over 60 percent of small schools (115 schools) are elementary level, and an additional 27 percent (49 schools) are K-12 or K-8.

Middle and high schools tend to be larger, both in number of total students enrolled and total students by grade. Small schools have an average grade size of under 24 students, while schools with over 600 students have on average nearly 150 kids per grade.



SOURCE: Vermont Agency of Education, 2014-2015 Enrollment Data.

# OUT OF SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Children spend, on average, 1,000 hours a year in school but 5,000 in their communities and with their families.<sup>30</sup> How they spend this time can facilitate positive development and growth experiences or can place them at risk for negative outcomes. Growing income inequality impacts dramatically what out-of-school options are available to children. Higher income families have always spent more on enrichment activities like private tutors, music lessons, camps, and educational materials, but now spend nearly \$9,000 per child per year, or almost seven times more than their lower-income counterparts.<sup>31</sup>

Children born in 2001 are facing an achievement gap 30-40 percent larger than their parent's generation,<sup>32</sup> and this growing inequity impacts not just success in school, but the likelihood that a student will graduate at all. Many experts point to the impact of after-school and summer programs specifically as a major factor in determining this gap.

Studies show that participation in summer and after-school programs can dramatically reduce achievement gaps: consistent participation in afterschool activities in elementary school can help close the gap in math achievement between low-income and high-income children by grade 5, reduce absences, and improve overall academic performance.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, many Vermonters do not have access to quality, affordable programs in their communities.

Vermont currently has 458 out-of-school time programs, including school-run programs, boys and girls clubs, and teen centers. While these programs serve over 21,000 children and youth across the state, an estimated 22,000 more would likely participate if a program were

available in their community.<sup>34</sup> Instead, 24 percent of Vermont's K-12 children are responsible for taking care of themselves after school.<sup>35</sup>

Nearly 80 percent of Vermont children ages 6-17 have all available parents in the workforce. For most families, that means there is a gap of 15-25 hours per week when parents are still at work and children are out of school and need supervision, a need that increases during school vacations.<sup>36</sup> While out-of-school programs can help provide safe, healthy settings for kids during this time, many families report cost as a significant barrier. Vermont families who pay for their child's afterschool program spend on average nearly \$350 per month, but only 9 percent of families report receiving government assistance with the cost of their child's program.<sup>37</sup>

The lack of access to quality out-of-school programming for low-income students is particularly disturbing because of the important role these programs play in providing healthy snacks and meals in the afternoons and during the critical summer months. While over 40 percent of Vermont students rely on free or reduced-price (FRL) meals during the school day, only 14 percent of afterschool participants in the state are FRL eligible. National participation rates for low-income students are much higher: 45 percent in 2014.<sup>38</sup> More than 1 in 6 children in the state live in households that are struggling to keep food on the table,<sup>39</sup> and research shows that children consume up to 50 percent of their daily calories in school.<sup>40</sup> After-school and summer programs are important interventions in fighting childhood hunger and can help reduce burdens on families that already struggle to make ends meet.<sup>41</sup>

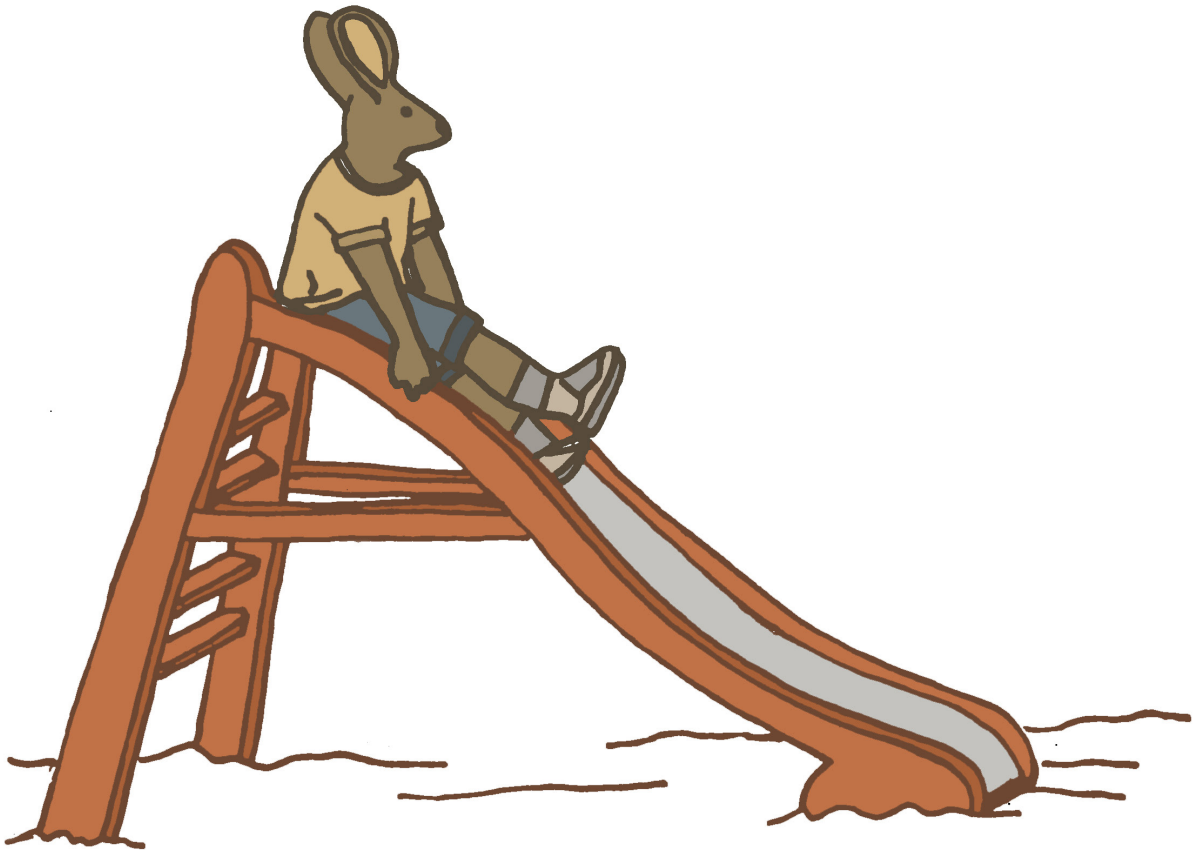
*We know that what children and youth are doing in the hours outside the classroom and over the summer plays a significant role in their future success. Afterschool and summer learning programs keep kids healthy and safe, inspire learners, and help working families. However, Vermont is faced with an opportunity gap where the types of experiences and programs that a student is able to participate in after school and over the summer depends largely on the level of their family's income and varies greatly from one community to the next.*

*If eliminating the achievement gap and providing equity in educational opportunities are indeed priorities for our state, then it is critical that we ensure that the children and youth in every Vermont community have access to the quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities.*

-Holly Morehouse,  
Executive Director  
Vermont Afterschool

## THE SUMMER SLIDE

Students across income brackets tend to return from summer vacation having lost math, spelling, and other foundational skills, but it is low-income students that experience the greatest loss. Low-income students lose more than two months of grade-level proficiency in reading achievement, while their middle-income peers make slight gains in reading level over the summer.<sup>42</sup> Two-thirds of the ninth grade achievement gap in reading can be attributed to summer learning-loss,<sup>43</sup> widening the achievement gap before the school year even begins.



# EXCLUSIONS

*Some Vermont kids learn early on that school is not a place for them.*

As we work to address the wide range of societal factors that mean more and more children show up unprepared or unable to excel in their studies, we must also look at how our schools may be contributing to an environment that tells some kids that school is not for them. Nationwide, suspensions and expulsions are on the rise, often for relatively minor disciplinary issues. The rates of expulsion for students of color, students with disabilities, and English-language learners are well above those of their peers, and this “discipline gap” has grown rapidly in recent years.<sup>46</sup> Vermont is no exception.

According to a January 2016 report<sup>47</sup> by Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe, over 4,000 students a year, or 5.3% of the statewide student public population, were excluded during the 2013, 2014, and 2015 school years. Students lost nearly 50,000 days of school to out-of-school suspensions and more than 19,000 days of class time to in-school suspensions during this time period.

Exclusions were not equally distributed across the student population. Students of color were 1.5 times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than their white peers, low income students were 2.8 times more likely than their higher-income peers, and students with IEPs were 2.4 times more likely.

A majority of suspensions are for non-violent offenses. Between 2013-2015 over half (52 percent) of all incidents leading to exclusionary action were for school policy or conduct violations, while less than one fifth were for violent violations related to assault, fighting, weapons possession, or threats to the school.

Research shows that being suspended—even once—doubles the risk that a student will drop out of high school.<sup>48</sup> Students lose instruction time, falling further behind in classes and often suffering socially. Low-income students may lose access to free and reduced-priced meals and other essential supports. Homeless students may not have anywhere to go during the school day, when many shelters are closed. Exclusionary discipline practices marginalize our children, teaching low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities in particular that Vermont schools are not for them.

*Research shows that being suspended—even once—doubles the risk that a student will drop out of high school.*

*Students who are suspended from school for minor infractions gain nothing from suspensions. They only learn that school is not a place for them. They are isolated from their education, less likely to trust adults in the education system, and more likely to get into trouble while at home on their own. Our schools can do more for students by teaching appropriate behavior, helping them learn from mistakes, and maintaining a connection to their education.*

- Jay Diaz, KICKED OUT!  
Unfair and Unequal Student Discipline in Vermont's Public Schools (2015)<sup>44</sup>

*Students who are barely maintaining a connection with their school often are pushed out, as if suspension were a treatment.... Putting students who face serious challenges on a path that leads them to detach from school or cut the already weak ties that prevent them from dropping out is a misguided practice.*

-Gary Orfield, in the forward for the UCLA Civil Rights Project Report Opportunities Suspended (2012)<sup>45</sup>

## HOMELESS STUDENTS

*Students who are runaway, homeless or staying in shelters are at additional risk when excluded from school as many shelters are only open at night, leaving these youth without other safe options during school hours.*

- Bethany Pombar, Interim Director,  
VT Coalition of Runaway and Homeless  
Youth Programs

Homelessness and unstable housing means that children may change schools frequently and face additional barriers in coming to school ready to learn: homeless children are three times more likely than their peers to face emotional or behavioral problems that interfere with learning.<sup>57</sup> One estimate suggests that students lose 3-6 months of education with every move to a new school.<sup>58</sup> Vermont students who experienced high mobility due to any cause “performed 3-10 percentile ranks lower than their stable counterparts did,” according to research conducted at UVM.<sup>59</sup>

As families relocate in search of affordable or safe housing, or to access shelters, children are often forced to change schools, sometimes multiple times a year. These changes are disruptive to a child’s education, social development, and relationship with a school-wide support base. According to the Institute for Children and Poverty, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs than their housed peers.<sup>60</sup>

## BULLYING & HARASSMENT

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students and racial minorities in Vermont report more bullying and harassment at school, and are more likely to miss school because they did not feel safe.

- According to the 2013<sup>61</sup> Youth Risk Behavior Survey, students of color were more than twice as likely to have been threatened at school and to have missed school because they felt unsafe.<sup>62</sup>

- LGBT students were four times more likely to miss school because they did not feel safe. They also reported experiencing bullying at more than twice the rate of their straight peers and were threatened at school almost three times more than their peers.<sup>63</sup>

## THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

The School-to-Prison-Pipeline is a term that describes a system that pushes traditionally marginalized students out of schools and into the criminal justice system. Advocates point to high-stakes testing, exclusionary and zero-tolerance disciplinary practices, and racial profiling as causes of the pipeline. Some key facts show that Vermont is not immune from this nationwide trend.

- Discipline is not an intervention: children who are suspended or expelled are more likely to have contact with the justice system, and this likelihood increases with every disciplinary action.<sup>49 50</sup>
- Students with disabilities and students of color were two to three times more likely to be suspended or expelled, and were more likely to be restrained and referred to law enforcement by school staff.<sup>51</sup>
- Vermont children as young as 10 can be tried in adult courts, and Vermont’s state’s attorneys, who have an unusually large amount of discretionary power, have typically prosecuted 16-17 years olds in adult court regardless of the offense.<sup>52</sup>
- Black youth in Vermont are more likely to be arrested and be charged in adult court than their white counterparts. Data from 2012 shows that black youth were nearly two and a half times more likely to be arrested than white youth and one and a half times more likely to have charges filed in adult court.<sup>53</sup>
- An analysis of Burlington Police Department data on traffic stops from 2009-2012 shows that African Americans are nearly twice as likely to be subjected to traffic stops, and are 2.5 times more likely to be searched than their white counterparts.<sup>54</sup>
- Black Vermonters were 4.4 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than their white counterparts, despite the fact that studies show similar rates of marijuana usage for white and black populations.<sup>55</sup>
- Vermont spent 1.7 times as much per prisoner as per public school student in 2009-2010.<sup>56</sup>



# GRADUATION RATES & POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

Vermont has one of the highest on-time graduation rates in the country: 86.6 percent of students graduate in four years. But our low-income students do not fare as well. Over 1-in-5 does not complete high school on time, compared to 1-in-25 middle or higher-income students.<sup>64</sup> While the state's high school dropout rate has gone down slightly in the past five years, it is still one of the highest in New England at 8.3 percent. And for low-income students, the dropout rate is nearly 16 percent, both the highest rate in the region: and the largest gap between students from different income groups.<sup>65</sup>

Students with disabilities, students of color, and English-language learners also experience lower on-time graduation rates than their peers. English-language learners are the least likely to graduate on time: with a 69 percent completion rate, they are 19 percentage points behind their peers. While many ELL students may need more time to complete high school based on the age they arrive and prior educational access, delayed graduation can still have significant emotional and social repercussions that mirror the experiences of other students who see their graduation delayed.

Students who do not complete high school with their peers are far less likely to go to college, and disparities that show up early on in school will likely continue into adulthood. Young people who have dropped out of high school are more than twice as likely as their college-educated peers to be living in poverty and

are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed.<sup>66</sup> Even those who complete high school see that their degrees earn them less and less: high school graduates aged 25-32 earn 11 percent less in today's dollars than the same group in 1965.<sup>67</sup>

## “FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION”

In 2009, Vermont set a goal of a 100 percent graduation rate by 2020.<sup>68</sup> Towards that end, the state passed Act 77, The Flexible Pathways Initiative in 2013. The law requires that all students in grades 7 through 12 will have Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) by the 2018-19 school year. The act also allows for more work-based learning and dual-enrollment in post-secondary classes. As the state moves away from rigid grade-level cohorts towards proficiency-based graduation requirements, it will be increasingly important to examine high school completion, dropout rates, and postsecondary attainment for these students.

Vermont's high graduation rate should not mask the disparities in graduates' college and career-readiness skills and post-secondary opportunities. Accessing advanced high school coursework, such as higher level math, more rigorous classes, and dual enrollment programs, are critical steps on the path to developing college and career-readiness.

## DUAL ENROLLMENT

Of the 1292 students who accessed dual enrollment opportunities in fiscal year 2014, only 27.3 percent were low-income students, 3.3 percent were special education students and 6.6 percent were English language learners (ELL) students. Middle- and higher-income students were three times more likely to access dual enrollment programs.<sup>69</sup>



## WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT?

A 2013 report<sup>75</sup> examining 50 years of dropout data described three categories of causes contributing to dropouts: push, pull, and fall out factors. A student may be **pushed out** through aspects of the school environment, such as discipline policies or testing. Students are **pulled out** of school through outside factors, such as childbirth, illness, or financial strains, whereas **fall out** is understood to occur when students become alienated from the school environment because of slow academic progress.

Recent data<sup>76</sup> shows that the top student-reported factor for dropping out is missing too many days of school. Over a quarter of students surveyed reported suspensions or expulsions as the primary reason for dropping out, and **a fifth of students reported that they didn't feel they belonged in school.** These and other push and fall out factors account for 63 percent of dropouts. Of students who were pulled out of school, more young men reported work obligations or a desire to get a GED, while many young women left because of pregnancy or family obligations.

## HIGHER EDUCATION

We see educational disparities persist and grow across generations. The same communities that currently experience the lowest graduation rates have experienced systematic political, educational, and economic disenfranchisement for generations. This “education debt,” described by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 2006<sup>70</sup>, has been offered as an alternative framework for understanding the achievement gap. In Vermont, we see that children from families where at least one parent has completed a college degree are three times more likely to plan for their own postsecondary education.<sup>71</sup> They are also twice as likely to be enrolled in college within a year of graduation.<sup>72</sup> These students have families with greater resources to support a college-bound student and networks and knowledge of the college process.

In 2014, Parents and Youth for Change, a group organizing to improve educational opportunities in Burlington and Winooski, conducted a listening campaign with over 100 Burlington youth from economically disadvantaged and immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Students expressed what they viewed as seemingly insurmountable challenges, including a lack of academic preparedness, information, and support in developing a financially viable plan to continue education beyond high school.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse data, 60 percent of Vermont students who graduated with a regular high school diploma in 2013 enrolled in an institution of higher education within 16 months of their high school graduation date and 45.8% of 2009 high school graduates completed college within six years.<sup>73</sup>

Of the 2009-2013 regular high school graduates in Vermont enrolled in postsecondary institutions within 2 years of graduation, 17.7 percent were low-income, 1.6 percent were ELL students and 3.5 percent were students with disabilities. While nearly half of students who do not face economic challenges (48.3 percent) complete college within 6 years, this success is shared by less than one-third of low-income students (30.7 percent), ELL students (32.7 percent) and students with disabilities (20.6 percent).<sup>74</sup>

# EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOR ALL VERMONT'S STUDENTS

*[C]hildren do not come in pieces but in families and communities and are profoundly affected by the norms, priorities, policies and values of our nation and culture... Our siloed organizational, governmental, policy and funding streams must comprehensively address the whole child from birth through the transition to adulthood in the real context of their lives responding to all of the major forces that help shape them. False either-ors between personal, family, community and societal responsibility for children need to stop. All of these child shaping forces must collaborate and put the child's healthy development at the center of our decision making.*

- Children's Defense Fund, America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline (2007)

**Who, then, is our educational system for?** Kids with economic stability and racial privilege tend to do well in school and always have.

We ask our schools, more than any other institution, to be an equalizer of opportunity. We do this because we know that education is linked to greater social mobility, higher incomes, lower unemployment rates,<sup>77</sup> and higher overall health indicators.<sup>78</sup> But the benefits of an education do not accrue equally to all members of our society.<sup>79</sup> A college-educated person born in the poorest fifth of the population is 2.5 times less likely to move to the richest quintile than a person born in the top fifth who did not go to college.<sup>80</sup> Black families headed by a college graduate have 33 percent less wealth than white families headed by someone who dropped out of high school,<sup>81</sup> and black men in college are as likely to be employed as white men with no high school diploma.<sup>82</sup> Generational wealth transfers account for more of one's advantage and likelihood to be wealthy than any factor, including education or family income.<sup>83</sup>

Our schools are not immune from, nor can they be asked to compensate for, massive inequality in our communities. Rather, schools are unique sites to see the impacts of our eroding social safety net. In the midst of debates about testing, teacher evaluations, and the cost of education, we see our schools asked to do more and more. Standardized evaluations do not track the myriad out-of-school factors that directly influence academic achievement, and our underfunded schools cannot address the problems of racism, poverty, and inequitable educational outcomes alone.

The following pages outline some suggestions for reducing inequality in our schools and strengthening the investment of Vermonters in an educational system that is truly meant for all of our young people.

## GOOD DATA

Testing can be used to reinforce a competitive, merit-based educational system, where teachers and students compete to access limited resources and disadvantage is magnified, but good data—from test scores and graduation rates to school discipline data and youth-reported risk behaviors—help to make visible systematic inequities and provide shorter feedback loops for attempted interventions.

We must prioritize data collection that has equity at its center. This means data that disaggregates for race, class, (dis)ability, and other crucial indicators. Advocates statewide are currently pushing for better collection of school discipline data,<sup>84</sup> as well as better data about post-secondary aspirations and graduation rates.<sup>85</sup> We must look not just at academic indicators, but also at high school completion, post-secondary enrollment and completion, as well as students' sense of belonging in school and in the larger community.

The Vermont Agency of Education is currently piloting Education Quality Reviews that will seek to be an alternative to relying on testing as a primary measure of school quality. The EQRs will incorporate school visits and student, teacher, parent and administrator feedback tied to academic achievement, personalized learning, school safety and climate, teacher quality, and financial management.

## STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Recent policy changes have signaled a move toward student-centered learning that is *personalized, flexible, proficiency-based, and student-owned*. Vermont's Flexible Pathways Initiative (Act 77), passed into law in July of 2013, seeks to foster a personalized student experience, comprised of “any combination of high-quality academic and experiential components,”<sup>86</sup> career and technical education, virtual learning, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment and early college. Evaluations will be based on proficiency rather than seat time.

These structural-relational changes may begin to address the systemic discrimination, bias, disenfranchisement, and lack of belonging that so many of our most vulnerable students face. Flexible Pathways can help be a bridge between schools and the larger communities the schools are part of. It can encourage students to attend college classes with students from a wider range of ages and life experience, take on apprenticeships or internships, or volunteer with a community-based organization.

As our schools begin to implement individually-driven practices, we must take care to ensure that these policies strengthen our commitment to the *collective* well-being of all children and families. If expanded learning opportunities are not affordable and accessible to all students then we run the risk of “further exacerbating a situation where wealthier families and those areas of the state with more money are able to provide more opportunities and programs for children and youth than are families and areas of the state with lesser means.”<sup>87</sup>

## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

As districts statewide consider how to cut costs and meet student need, we must consider how our schools can act as a resource-base in their communities. The Community School model<sup>88</sup> offers a vision that reduces the silos that make accessing supports difficult. Allowing our schools to become hubs for the community, they understand that both academic and out-of-school factors influence student learning and development and prepare students for college, career, citizenship, and life. Molly Stark Elementary School<sup>89</sup> in Bennington has been a model for the state, working with the larger community to offer on-site health services, after school, and summer school programs in a school where over 70 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

## INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

The great irony of our current approach to disciplinary issues in schools is that the very kids who are most at risk of dropping out are the ones who are most likely to be pushed out via exclusionary discipline practices like suspension and expulsion. Data shows that students are safer and more likely to succeed academically when they feel connected to their school,<sup>90</sup> but exclusionary discipline sends a message to high-risk kids that they are not welcome.

Many schools in the state have already implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or restorative justice practices. Research shows that students in schools that use similar practices are less likely to be referred for disciplinary action, are less likely to be suspended or expelled, and are more likely to feel safe at school.<sup>91</sup> Vermont schools practicing PBIS generally have lower rates of disciplinary action and shorter average suspension lengths.<sup>92</sup> We must encourage schools and districts with high rates of suspension and inequitable treatment of their students to seek similar solutions, and provide them with the resources and training they need to implement them.

Further, we must ensure that every school in the state is held to minimum expectations that seek to reduce the use of exclusionary practices: limiting out-of-school exclusion to violent and immediately threatening behavior; eliminating zero-tolerance policies and mandatory minimums that tie the hands of administrators who wish to look at the specific circumstances for a given student when considering exclusion; and provide for meaningful opportunity for academic progress and access to essential school supports in the cases where exclusion is necessary.

*Economic expansion alone will not solve Vermont's problems. Policy changes over the last 35 years produced stark disparities in wealth and income between those at the top and everyone else, and new policies are needed to reverse that trend.*

*Policies that increase wages and reduce the income gap, make health care and child care more affordable and accessible, and ensure that all children have the skills they need when they graduate from high school can help to make Vermont a state that works for everyone. In the long run, Vermont will be better off when all Vermonters are better off.*

-Public Assets Institute,  
*State of Working Vermont 2015*

## PROGRAMS THAT REDUCE ECONOMIC AND RACIAL INEQUALITY

In order to reduce gaps in student performance, graduation rates and other indicators of how schools are working for our most disadvantaged students, we must address the culture inside our schools as well as the root causes and impacts of economic inequality and racism in our communities at large.

Parents and Youth for Change, a group organizing to improve educational opportunities in Burlington and Winooski, has emphasized the importance of involving parents and youth for whom the system is not working to shape priorities, policies, and programs in our schools. Black Lives Matter VT<sup>93</sup> has emphasized the need to address racism in Vermont schools, from more adequately

*“Let us learn about people who look like us.”*

-BHS Student speaking to the need for culturally inclusive curriculum<sup>95</sup>

addressing and interrupting bullying and harassment and disproportionate disciplinary exclusions of students of color to increasing multi-cultural curriculum for all students and training in implicit bias and cultural competency for all educators and administrators. Additionally, as a state with a growing population of English Language Learners in our schools, we must ensure there are sufficient resources to meet the educational needs of these students.<sup>94</sup>

An equitable approach to education is one that recognizes that there is no level playing field that all kids start from. We must consider the specific and structural barriers that people face because of income, race, ethnicity, language, and immigration status. From racial bias in law enforcement to legacies of housing discrimination, racism and bias impact children's health,<sup>96</sup> sense of belonging, and visions for their futures.

Expanding access to high quality childcare, early educational opportunities, out-of-school programming, and paid parental leave can help more kids show up to school ready to learn. Research shows that social programs such as SNAP (food stamps), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and rental subsidies have a significant impact on child poverty rates.<sup>97</sup> Living wages, stable, affordable housing, access to healthy food, and reliable access to transportation are essentials for people of any age to thrive. We must continue to support the maintenance and expansion of these programs and push for an accurate assessment of the ongoing costs of supporting our state-level commitments.<sup>98</sup>

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## SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Jay Diaz  
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Holly Morehouse  
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Marty Strange  
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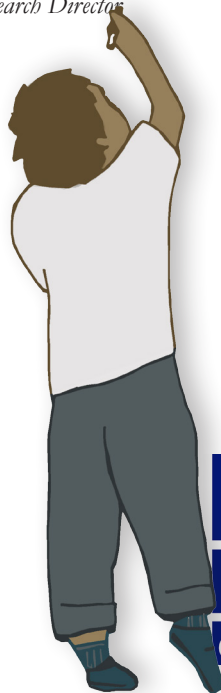
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This report was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings presented in this report are those of Voices for Vermont's Children alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.