

Note: This is proposed to be a new chapter within the Regional Plan, and may ultimately be merged with the Childcare section of the Utilities, Facilities, and Services element (both Education and Childcare were previously contained within the Utilities and Facilities element).

I. EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES AND SERVICES

~~As we approach the end of the final decade of the 20th, the public mission of our educational system becomes more relevant to the region's citizens. Access to a system of quality education is required to achieve social and economic goals throughout the TRORC Region. According to Vermont Statute, the right to public education is key to guaranteeing political and civil rights to constituents. Indeed, "[t]o keep Vermont's democracy competitive and thriving, Vermont students must be afforded substantially equal access to a quality basic education."¹~~

~~Three fundamental economic changes are necessary to achieve equal opportunity and engender to prosperity. One is that aggregate wealth must be increased to improve financial security. Second, the wealth of the State must be spread into more rural and remote areas where incomes are well below state medians. Third, financial and geographical barriers to post-secondary education need to be eliminated.~~

~~Sustained regional and economic development will be impossible in the region unless financial and geographic access to education is affordable and geographically convenient. Without a well-educated work force, the region, like the rest of Vermont, will be unable to compete with other states for well-paying jobs. Further, education and child care are necessary to community vitality. Education institutions make towns attractive to residents and employers alike.~~

~~Education serves as a driver of local economic development, and investments in education contribute greatly to the overall economic health of the Region.² Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, The economic downturn that began in 2008 recessions emphasized the relationship between economic development and an educated work force. Economic restructuring has following the recession resulted in a shift away from jobs in manufacturing to service sector employment. Many of these new jobs are at lower wage levels, as is true of such work in our regional growth centers. However, as workforce skillsets increase and improve through investments in regional educational opportunities, so, too, will job and wage growth in local economies.³ Personal income levels increase with gains in educational attainment. The earning gap between college graduates and high school graduates remains significant, with college graduates earning seventy percent more. Poverty decreases with educational attainment.~~

Challenges to Educational Attainment

- It is anticipated that the Region may see population growth of up to 6.2% between now and 2030, placing increased strain on some of the education facilities that currently exist.⁴ Some towns in the TRORC Region may see pronounced growth, while others may experience population decline. The totality of these impacts, whether positive or negative population fluctuations, will directly influence the breadth and use of educational services throughout the Region.

- Declining enrollment numbers in certain towns and villages threaten the future of local schools, which, if closed, would increase burdens placed on schools in adjacent municipalities. Over the past decade, there have been four school closures in the Region: Hancock, Granville, Plymouth, and Bridgewater. Many others are in active discussions about consolidation.
- The cost of publicly educating children places significant financial strain on many municipalities. These costs, coupled with potential school consolidation, may be further compounded by the need to carry out extensive renovations of remaining schools or the construction of new facilities so as to maintain a level of service for students that allows for academic achievement and growth.
- Continuing and adult education programs are few throughout the Region, and are increasingly important as the elder population grows in coming years in order to promote lifelong learning, societal engagement, mental health, and well-being.
- Lack of access to high-speed internet in portions of the region hinders access to educational materials for many, irrespective of age or level of education.

A. Elementary and Secondary Schools

Sound planning for educational facilities and programs is necessary to support the social, economic, and cultural welfare of a community. There is a positive correlation between levels of higher education attainment and higher earnings; lower unemployment and poverty rates; decreased reliance on social welfare programs; and higher levels of civic engagement.⁵ Further, higher levels of education positively correlate to improved health, well-being, and lower crime rates.⁶ A quality education provides the foundation for a child's productive future, enabling the child to make positive contributions to business, civic affairs, and family life.

All public schools are governed by a district school board elected by the voters of their respective municipalities, and administrative support to the district board is received from supervisory unions. In 20013/20014 there were a total of forty-seven-five educational facilities within, or serving, the region. Total enrollments amounted to approximately 9,905 7,888, covering grades K through 12 and special programs. Some school districts and municipalities accept, on a year-to-year basis, tuition-paying students from neighboring communities that do not provide elementary or secondary education, or lack adequate facilities. (See Table 25 below, which depicts individual school facilities and enrollment totals for the 20013/20014 school academic year).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, school enrollments experienced slow to moderate growth, but this trend has reversed in recent years-decades. Declining enrollments have brought staffing, programmatic, and financial planning challenges to schools throughout the region. It has resulted in the closure of four schools in the TRORC Region in the past decade in Granville, Hancock, Plymouth, and Bridgewater. If this trend continues, additional schools and municipalities will have to make the decision whether to down-size their staffs and programs, or investigate the idea of regional schools. Regional schools will likely require one of two things: the building of entirely new facilities that are in more centralized locations for participating towns or the

renovation of existing centrally-located school facilities. How towns will make this determination is yet to be determined, but both eventualities will come at a substantial cost.

Table 25: Regional School Facility Enrollment Totals, Academic Year 2013-2014

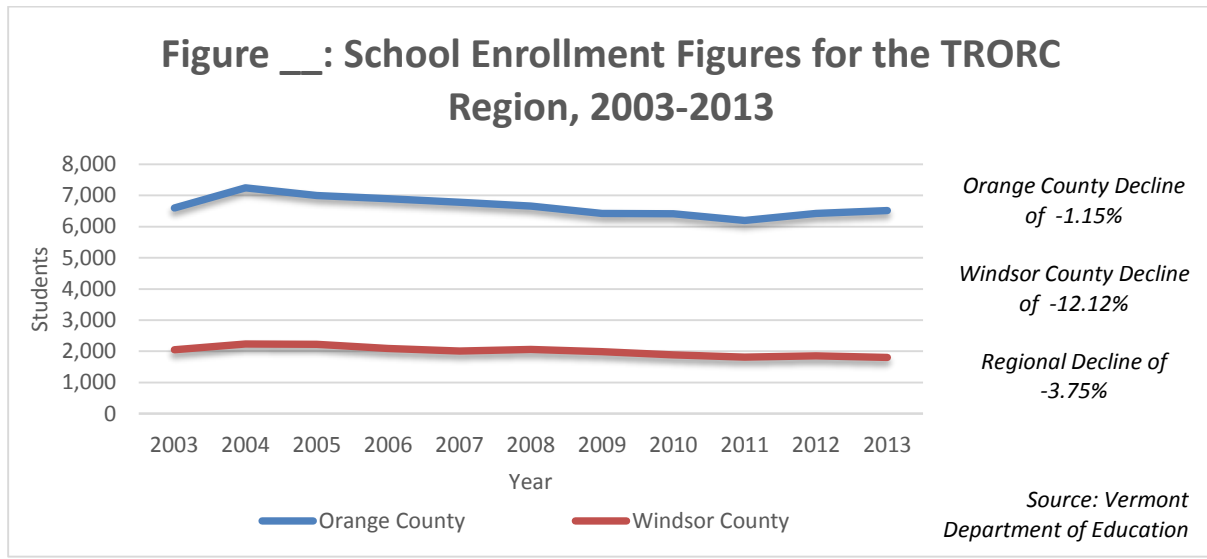
			0	K P/T	K F/T	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	AW	Total	
Blue Mountain SD	Blue Mountain USD #21 (District)	Blue Mountain USD #21 (School)	44	-	29	27	44	34	36	30	29	24	22	27	29	29	26	-	430	
Orange East SU	Bradford ID	Bradford Elementary School	32		35	36	26	32	31	34	16								242	
	Bradford ID	Riverbend Career and Tech	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	
	Bradford ID	Connecticut River Academy	-	-	-	1	1	1	3	2	4	3	-	1	4	4	2	-	26	
	Oxbow UHSD #30 (District)	Oxbow UHSD #30 (School)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	49	49	74	84	68	66	-	390	
	Newbury	Newbury Elementary School	19	-	18	24	17	16	17	10	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	143	
	Thetford	Thetford Elementary School	8		22	28	27	26	32	33	34								210	
	Thetford	Thetford Academy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	38	66	46	52	62	-	295
	Thetford	Open Fields School	-	4	1	1	2	2	7	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23
	Waits River Valley USD #36 (District)	Waits River Valley USD #36 (School)	26	-	28	32	25	14	26	20	29	20	27	-	-	-	-	-	-	247
Orange Southwest SU	Braintree	Braintree School	2		23	9	9	11	11	7	15								87	
	Brookfield	Brookfield School	1		8	8	8	6	7	11	9								58	
	Randolph	Randolph Elementary School	5	50		47	38	56	42	38	52								328	
	Randolph	Vermont Academy of Science and Technology	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	56	-	56	
	Randolph UHSD #2 (District)	Randolph UHSD #2 (School)										74	68	69	98	71	65	1	446	
Orange Windsor SU	Chelsea	Chelsea Elementary High School	2	23		11	13	11	11	13	10	18	10	18	27	19	8		194	
	Chelsea	Brookhaven Learning Center	-	-	-	1	1	3	2	2	2	3	2	-	-	-	-	-	16	
	Royalton	South Royalton Elementary/High School	15		32	18	22	21	25	24	23	22	21	38	41	28	32		362	
	Sharon	Sharon Elementary School	34		15	15	14	20	22	14	13								147	
	Sharon	The Sharon Academy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17	19	33	33	32	32	-	166	
	Strafford	Newton Elementary School	4		7	11	15	7	17	13	16	13	18						121	
	Tunbridge	Tunbridge Central School			14	15	14	12	13	16	10	16	11						121	
	Vershire	The Mountain School	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	45	-	-	45

			0	K P/T	K F/T	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	AW	Total		
Rivendell Interstate School District	Rivendell Interstate School District	Samuel Morey Elementary School	17		24	22	24	16	21	19	36								179		
		Westshire School	24		17	14	9	17	13											94	
Hartford SD	Hartford	Dothan Brook School	43		43	37	37	35	37	49										281	
		Hartford High School													148	138	127	145	8	566	
		Hartford Memorial Middle School										114	92	115						321	
		Mid Vermont Christian School	-	5		9	4	11	6	6	7	4	9	5	8	16	11	-	-	101	
		Ottawaquechee School	28		51	38	36	33	34	30											250
		Potter's House	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	10
		White River School	38		36	28	33	30	35	28											228
Norwich SD	Norwich	Marion W Cross School	7		38	51	45	52	47	46	46									332	
Windsor Central SU	Barnard	Barnard Central School	10		7	8	3	8	9	14	3									62	
	Bridgewater	Bridgewater Village School	2		5	7	5	5	6	5	3									38	
	Pomfret	Pomfret School			8	4	8	9	10	13	11									63	
	Woodstock	Woodstock Elementary School	2		17	29	26	18	31	23	27									173	
	Woodstock UHSD #4	Woodstock Senior UHSD #4													95	107	81	93		376	
		Woodstock Union Middle School											74	63						137	
	Woodstock UHSD #4	Upper Valley Waldorf School	-	30	-	8	12	14	13	20	17	11	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	138	
Windsor Northwest SU	Bethel	Bethel Elementary School	28		33	15	26	19	24	12	21									178	
		Whitcomb Junior/Senior High School											27	19	26	21	22	15		130	
	Rochester	Rochester School	14		13	13	11	7	8	9	10	8	8	12	15	16	12			156	
	Stockbridge	Stockbridge Central School	4	8		10	5	6	8	9	4									54	
Windsor Southeast SU	Hartland	Hartland Elementary School	7		34	29	26	44	27	38	34	33	26							298	
	Hartland	Regional Totals	372	129	529	579	542	562	595	564	588	515	516	585	623	581	599	9	7888		

Source: Vermont Department of Education, 2013

In the decade from 2003 to 2013, schools in the TRORC Region saw a 3.75% decline in the number of enrolled students. Where once there were 8,650 students for academic year 2003-2004 and 47 educational facilities, there were just over 7,888 enrolled students in 2013 and a loss of 2 schools. Viewed by counties as a whole, the decline in student enrollment was most pronounced in the TRORC towns in Windsor County, which saw student numbers fall by over 12% in one decade. The largest gains and declines in individual school enrollment numbers were seen in Orange County schools. The student body at Vermont Academy of Science and Technology in Randolph, which provides specialized and advanced courses for students from other area

schools, increased by 133%. Meanwhile, enrollment at Potter’s House in Hartford declined by 53%. In Windsor County, the Bethel Elementary School’s enrollment numbers increased by over 24%, and the Rochester School’s student numbers declined by nearly 38%. Sustained levels of decline may have untold social and economic impacts for towns in the TRORC Region, and are, therefore, an area of vigilance and concern for the future well-being of the Region.



Homeschooling

For the academic year running from 2013 to 2014, there were a total of 145 known home study students in the TRORC Region. There are more scattered across 24 other towns and villages, but, due to there being fewer than 11 students in each of those places, the Agency of Education (AOE) has suppressed their overall student figures. What this does mean is that there could be as many as an additional 240 home study students residing in our Region. Altogether, this could mean that 5% of all students in the Region are being homeschooled as opposed to mainstreamed in local schools. What may come as a surprise is that four of the towns in the Region did not have any home study students represented in Agency data, and one of the towns lacking such students also lacks a school altogether.

Homeschooled students are reliant on parents for their curriculum, but all children enrolled in home study programs are to have access to a quality of education, in accordance with the State Board of Education, the AOE, and Vermont state law. The AOE sets guidelines for home study in Vermont, and this does include provisions allowing home study students to partake in classes and other activities at local public schools, as per Act 119 (although independent schools are not required to make such offerings).⁷ There are also community organizations, such as Artistree in Pomfret, that provide extracurricular programs to supplement in-class learning and socialize students outside of the home. All told, these homeschooled children must have a minimum of 60% of their core academic coursework conducted at home.

Determinants of Education Funding

Quality educational facilities are expensive investments to construct and maintain, and per pupil tuition rates are increasingly steep. As a result, schools require careful and diligent long-range planning by school officials, administrators, and citizens. Overall state aid to local and regional districts has declined, placing even greater burdens on towns to fund school costs through property taxes. Starting in March, 1995, the State Capital Construction Aid Program, administered by the Vermont Department of Education, was available only to school districts with local voter approved construction projects.—Despite many attempts by the Vermont General



Assembly and Executive Branch to reform property tax/school aid, Vermont has been unable to adopt a reform package that provides relief from high property taxes, as experienced in many towns.

In 1997, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that total state funding would be provided to school districts. Prior to this judgment (the *Brigham v. State of Vermont* decision), the state would provide aid that augmented local property taxes to fund the school districts through a state-aided local tax system. The court held in *Brigham* that such a policy was unconstitutional because it unfairly allowed students in towns with higher property values to receive a higher level of education funding per pupil than less affluent areas. Following the Vermont Supreme Court ruling, the state passed Act 60, also known as the “Equal Educational Opportunity Act,” which seeks to balance educational spending across school districts, irrespective of the wealth in a particular district. Act 68 was later passed in 2003 to rectify imbalances in Act 60. Through Act 68, the state Education Fund disperses money to school districts via categorical grants and education spending toward school district budgets. Together, these funding opportunities totaled more than \$1.35 billion in 2012, and were supplemented by the homestead property tax.⁸ The latter tax varies proportionally with each district’s education spending per pupil, with different weighting used for different types of students.

Provision of Free Appropriate Education

Under Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, no disabled individual “shall, solely by reason of her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance,” irrespective of the nature or extent of the individual’s physical or mental disability.⁹ Generally speaking, all school-age children with disabilities are covered under Section 504, with “appropriate education” encompassing the provision of regular classes and all necessary aids and services that support a child’s learning needs, including services such as speech, occupational, physical, psychological, and/or diagnostic medical services.¹⁰

For all intents and purposes, the educational programs designed for disabled students must meet the needs of those designed for nondisabled students to an equal extent, be that through the creation of an individual education plan or otherwise. Students must be allowed, to the fullest extent possible, to be educated with a cohort of nondisabled students, unless it is demonstrated that their needs can be most effectively served in a different setting. Student tuition is to be free of charge to disabled students, with no additional financial burden placed on families or guardians; therefore, fees are to be borne by the school district. This federal act warrants consideration by all school districts, particularly at a time when some educational institutions specifically designed to meet the educational needs of disabled segments of the state’s population have closed or are facing closure (for example, the Austine School for the Deaf in Brattleboro).

Poverty and Education

It is important to note that the region’s school system provides the main avenue of support for children living in poverty. In Orange County, 18.7% of children under 18 live in poverty, and, in Windsor County, 12.8% of children under 18 live in poverty, according to 2013 American Community Survey data. For those children who attend school, the school provides them with

the supportive care they require, including providing them with important nutritional supplements through the free and reduced lunch program, access to case managers and counselors, and providing them with a safe and supportive environment. Schools also have a strong impact on children living in poverty by providing them with the opportunity to form strong, positive relationships, either formally through mentor programs or informally with teachers, coaches, and fellow students. Finally, the small class sizes in the region allow observant teachers to act as an early warning system, and to intervene on behalf of a child whose circumstances might warrant greater attention and support. Schools can have a positive impact on students; however, the level of impact is possibly greatest with students from lower-income families. As a consequence, schools play a critical role in combating regional poverty.

Another facet of poverty with respect to education is the provision of services to homeless children. Per the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, homeless children are defined as those who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”¹¹ Homeless students, under the Act, are to be afforded the same Free Appropriate Education as are other students that are mainstreamed in the local school system. They have a right to the “same challenging State student academic achievement standards to which all students are held.”¹² All homeless student data in Vermont is supplied to the Agency of Education by Local Education Agencies (LEAs – Supervisory Unions and a few school districts), and the data they receive reflects the homeless students enrolled in schools during a given academic year.

In the interest of confidentiality of minors, Vermont’s data is suppressed for school districts with fewer than 11 homeless students. Consequently, it is difficult to gauge how many students are homeless in a given academic year. Furthermore, it is likely there are duplicates in the statewide counts because some students experiencing homelessness move in and out of different LEA catchment areas during the school year (more than one LEA will count them). What is known with certainty is that the state data showed a total of 114 unsuppressed students within the TRORC Region for the academic year running from 2013-2014. This figure includes 78 students from the Hartford School District, 29 students from the Orange Windsor S.U., and 17 students from the Windsor Southeast S.U. All other regional LEAs are listed as having some number of homeless students, but their data has been suppressed.

The availability of homeless student data and its limitations (such as transient student populations across LEAs) makes it difficult to draw concrete inferences about homeless youth in the Region’s school system. However, we do know that they are present, and they must be afforded equal opportunity to education as students of differing means if the cycle of poverty they live on a daily basis is to be broken.

Vocational Training and the Region’s Youth

In recent years, promoting educational opportunities that support the acquisition of professional skillsets and allow students to develop a firmer grasp of local employment sector opportunities has become a hot button issue for both the Region and the state. Act 77, more commonly known as the Flexible Pathways Initiative, was passed by the Vermont Legislature in 2013 with the intention of expanding educational opportunities to include new learning initiatives, including more work-based learning and access to Career and Technical Education.¹³ This initiative is intended, in part, to help students align their interests and abilities with perspective professional prospects within the context of their academic curriculum. It is one means of many that students

may be granted greater exposure to the Region's industrial sectors and promote overall career development. Any such efforts to provide employment resources and exposure to the Region's youth should be encouraged.

Perspective employers from an array of local enterprises and students alike stand to benefit substantially from the formal establishment of connections between students and the working world, both within and outside of the traditional classroom. These connections serve as an enriching supplement to traditional academic course offerings. Providing opportunities for the Region's youth to see what local jobs have to offer and the aptitude required to complete jobs may serve as an incentive to keep many youth in our communities well beyond high school.

B. Higher Education

Vermont Technical College

In 1962, the Vermont School of Agriculture and the Vermont Agricultural and Technical Institute merged to form Vermont Technical College (VTC). VTC is part of the five-member Vermont State Colleges System. Located in Randolph Center, the 600 acre college VTC campus consists of thirty-one buildings, which includes a farm and home and automotive learning center. The Randolph campus supports a current enrollment of roughly 700 1,650 students. Over the past decade alone, the student body size has increased by over 135 percent. The VTC school network also has campuses in Williston, Brattleboro, and Bennington, along with other satellite campuses elsewhere in the state.

Vermont Technical College offers both two and four year programs, certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor degree programs in a range of academic areas including: engineering technology, architectural and building technology, agribusiness, and computer and information technology, sustainable agriculture, business technology and management, applied technologies, allied health and nursing, landscape design, veterinary technology, and renewable energy. Additionally, the school provides continuing education opportunities for the region's residents of all ages, and more advanced and specialized course offerings to the Region's youth through the Vermont Academy of Science and Technology. Most students are primarily from Vermont and other New England states. VTC retains an excellent placement record for its graduates, many of which find employment within the region. VTC also maintains a Center for Business and Industry (CBI), which provides outreach programs and services to business and industry clients.

Vermont Law School

Founded in 1972, Vermont Law School (VLS) is a private institution offerings legal education to approximately 450 students throughout the United States, and internationally, and via online distance learning programs. Located in the village of South Royalton, the school offers ~~three~~ multiple advanced degrees: Master of Studies in Environmental Law and Policy (MELP), Master of Energy Regulation and Law (MERL), Master of Food and Agriculture Law and Policy (MFALP), Master of Laws in Environmental Law (LLM), Master of Laws in Energy Law (LLM), Master of Laws in American Legal Studies (LLM), and Juris Doctorates (JD). VLS is a ~~private institution and includes home~~ to the Environmental Law Center, which oversees the ~~M.S.E.L~~ masters and ~~L.L.M.~~ LLM programs and while also offerings education on the issues and

values underlying environmental law and policy. Additionally, the Center provides training opportunities ~~for~~ to mid-career professionals, and serves the region by conducting extensive programs on current environmental issues.

VLS is the home of the South Royalton Legal Clinic, where second and third year law students work under the supervision of professors and practicing attorneys, offering legal services to low-income clients. Additionally ~~Also~~, the Environmental Law Center operates the Environmental and Natural Resources Law Clinic, where students gain experience by working on actual environmental law cases under the auspices of professors and attorneys. VLS is also home to the Institute for Energy and the Environment, which provides academic and professional research opportunities to students and staff scholars on a range of energy law and policy issues. The Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS), a more recent addition to VLS, provides advocates and entrepreneurs in the agricultural and food sectors with the legal tools that will support the sustainable food system of the future.

Center for Cartoon Studies

The Center for Cartoon Studies, located in the heart of White River Junction, is a post-graduate education institution that offers a two-year Master of Fine Arts for students looking to pursue a career in the realm of comics and graphic novels. The school also offers one- and two-year Certificates in Cartooning and annual summer workshop opportunities. The school was founded in 2004, and is unique in being the only higher education program of its kind within the country. The curriculum spans themes of art, graphic design, and literature with respect to the creation and production of comic and graphic writing. It currently enrolls just over 100 students, and, like other higher education institutions in the region, is a huge economic driver for the prosperity of both Hartford and the wider TRORC Region.

Community College of Vermont

The Community College of Vermont is an accredited college offering a range of associate degrees in the arts and science as well as certificate programs that help further employment goals or pave the way for continued studies at the bachelor degree level. The school has no main campus. Instead, services are delivered through a network of twelve site offices around Vermont and in online classrooms. The College is part of the Vermont State College system, and it provides degree and non-degree programs to ~~9,000~~ 5,918 students statewide as of the 2014/2015 academic year. The CCV has a facility in Wilder, which serves 350 part-time and full-time students; other sites close to the region include Montpelier, Rutland, St. Johnsbury, and Springfield.

Other Institutions

Although not located within the region, the following nearby institutions also serve the region's residents:

- Champlain College – Burlington
- College for Lifelong Learning – Lebanon, NH
- Dartmouth College – Hanover, NH
- ~~Lebanon College – Lebanon, NH~~

- Green Mountain College – Poultney
- Middlebury College – Middlebury
- New Hampshire Technical College – Claremont, NH
- Norwich University – Northfield
- St. Michael's College – Winooski
- University of Vermont – Burlington
- Vermont State Colleges – Castleton, Johnson, Lyndon
- Woodbury College – Montpelier

C. Continuing Education

The availability of adult education services is critical to the social and economic well-being of the region and its residents. The Vermont AOE defines adult learners as: “persons 16 years of age and older, who may or may not be enrolled in school, and lacking essential skills or a credential equivalent to high school completion.” The Agency funds continuing education through its Adult Education and Literacy Program. In the region, the Agency of Education funds three adult learning centers: the Vermont Adult Learning Center in Hartford, and the two Central Vermont Adult Basic Education Centers in Randolph and Bradford. These centers offer classes free of cost to adults in basic skills, General Educational Development (GED) certification, English as a second language, college transition skills, and work readiness skills, including WorkKeys (ACT) certification. Additionally, The Family Place, a family support center, offers courses to young mothers with the aim of helping them earn their GED and acquire basic employment skills.

While both of the Community Action Agencies covering the TRORC Region (Southeastern Vermont Community Action and Captone Community Action) have adult education and job skills programs, neither of them have physical centers that offer their services within the region. Instead, participants are required to travel outside the Region for these educational opportunities. This limits access of the regions lower-income residents to this specific avenue for educational services. Through accessing adult education services, lower income residents have the opportunity to improve their financial security by removing educational barriers to higher-level employment.

As Vermont’s senior population significantly increases in coming years, the State will be confronted with the need for both new educational and recreational opportunities that can help fulfill the intellectual and emotional needs of the state’s retirees and elders. There are a number of opportunities for seniors to be involved in continuing education programs throughout the Region, but distance, lack of safe and reliable transportation, lack of access to high speed internet, and a lack of understanding of the basic facets of information technology may preclude many from enjoying the opportunities available. Currently, with respect to in-person instructional classes within the TRORC Region, residents can participate in classes at Artistree in Woodstock and Vermont Technical College in Randolph. Dartmouth College also offers continuing education courses in nearby Hanover, NH through its OSHER Lifelong Learning Institute. Riverbend Career and Tech and the Oxbow High School, both in Bradford, also offer adult programs. Additionally, there are opportunities to take classes online through public

libraries (purchased from L@ad) and the University of Vermont. Some continuing education opportunities may be free for residents, while others may be fee-based.

D. The Future of Education in the Region

Many of our Region’s communities have a school. Schools are often seen as the center of a community or at the very least a location that brings the townspeople together, but declining enrollments and an aging population are making the traditional model of one school in every town less sustainable. Surveys in many of our communities tend to show a growing frustration with the cost of education in Vermont. As a result, many communities continue to work on ways that they can collaborate together to decrease costs and maintain the quality of education desired by everyone.

Some communities have opted to close their schools or merge schools with other communities. If the trend toward smaller classes and fewer children in many towns continues, more communities will need to engage in these discussions. However, the closing or merging of schools is not a simple decision. For towns with no defined community center, a school often acts as the central focus of the community. In many communities, the academic institutions are the largest employer(s) and the psychological center of the community. Down-sizing or closing of schools means, in many instances, laying off neighbors and friends. Schools provide a place where members of the community can join together to support common themes, provide opportunities for citizens to connect, and create a sense of unity. They are also a safe space for residents in the event of emergencies, often doubling as emergency shelters and response centers. Their utility to towns is unmatched.

Addressing declining enrollment numbers, deterioration of school structures and infrastructure, and increasing financing pressures in a manner that is balanced with meeting the need for well-being, safety, and academic excellence for all students of every age is no small feat. Engaging in these discussions is critical to the future health of the education system in the TRORC Region. These discussions are intricately interwoven, too, with discussions around utilities and facilities, transportation, economic development, and energy concerns. For example, multi-modal access to public facilities like schools is needed for purposes of safety in as much as promoting a healthy lifestyle. Providing efficient and timely bussing opportunities to schools and extracurricular activities will bolster academic and professional success. Ensuring all students have access to high speed internet will extend our students’ academic offerings beyond the brick and mortar classroom setting, and put students at an equal footing with those from other, more developed regions of the nation. Improving energy efficiency in our schools through the installation of LED lighting, thermal efficiency improvements, solar heat pumps, and renewable energy technologies will improve schools’ bottom lines while also making schools more environmentally sustainable.

E. Infrastructure

Many schools throughout the state face the constant threat of repair or renovation, with rehabilitation efforts being a harbinger of increased costs for residents. The TRORC Region is

not an exception to this rule, and this can be a daunting prospect for towns to consider. Inadequate insulation, accessibility issues, aging electrical wiring systems, and crumbling infrastructure plague many a school, compelling principals and superintendents to defer repair work in some instances. Providing a safe, secure, and suitable environment for the region's children is a key concern for the region's well-being. A healthy school environment that affords children a chance to thrive intellectually and socially attracts families to the region, creates jobs, and helps foster vibrant communities.

The threat of repair is one element of many that has been considered when determining whether schools ought to be consolidated. In the event that communities choose to close or merge schools, how to manage vacated infrastructure should be part of the discussion. For many communities, the closure of a school can present new opportunities. Because schools are often located within villages or town centers, they can become prime locations for reuse in areas that are otherwise built up. Possible options for reuse of existing school buildings could include:

- Town Offices and other Municipal services
- Inclusive, mixed age and income housing opportunities
- Senior Centers
- Light industrial development
- Business incubator or office park

In addition to the existing school building, facilities that have land which had been utilized for athletic purposes, may now be available for new development.

F. Goals, Policies and Recommendations

Goals

1. Accessible and affordable educational facilities and services throughout the Region that meet or exceed statewide standards, including life-long learning opportunities.
2. The Region's educational system provides quality services despite student-aged population fluctuations, and appropriate measures are taken to consider consolidation and/or the reuse and repurposing of facilities in the wake of closure.
3. Students have access to quality vocational and workforce training opportunities to prepare them for future career opportunities.

Policies

1. The construction of primary educational facilities shall occur in or within close proximity to existing or planned regional growth areas, so as to maximize their accessibility to people and infrastructure as well as to contribute to the vitality of communities.
2. Towns in the Region should consider the need for educational facilities and services within their capital budgeting and programming that promotes flexible facility use in anticipating the need for future growth and improvements.

3. Promote the expansion of continuing education and vocational education opportunities.
4. School construction and renovation opportunities that promote the use of existing municipal infrastructure and multi-modal transportation access routes for the enhancement of designated downtown areas.
5. Adaptive reuse of vacant school facilities that occurs in a manner that enhances villages and downtowns and stimulates the local economy.
6. The sustainability of existing school systems shall be evaluated by municipalities, school boards, and other stakeholders in an equitable and transparent manner that considers the needs of students of all ages and mental and physical abilities.

Recommendations

1. Support local efforts to assess capacity issues in our Region’s schools, and, conversely, that explore opportunities to consolidate where appropriate. This is of particular importance with respect to facilities that currently do—or in the future may—serve multiple jurisdictions, due to inherent land use implications of such decisions.
2. In assisting towns with capital plan and budget formulation, ensure that member towns anticipate and plan for improvements to public school facilities.
3. Coordinate with the supervisory unions and the Agency of Education to create a regional approach to planning that considers the need for new school facilities and programs.
4. Work with local communities to determine which locations are most desirable for and best suited to the growth of new or relocated educational facilities throughout the region.
5. Encourage the development of school-business partnerships that promote valuable and sustainable employment opportunities in the Region through vocational and workforce training experiential learning.
6. Facilitate coordination between town and school authorities to create and maintain safe pedestrian access and transit opportunities to educational facilities, in line with Safe Routes to School efforts.
7. Ensure towns assess and incorporate the needs of disabled children into educational facility and budgetary planning efforts to ensure the provision of free and appropriate education for all children.

¹ 16 V.S.A. § 1.

² Berger, Noah and Peter Fisher. “A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity.” *Economic Policy Institute*. August 2013. <http://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>.

³ Bartik, Timothy. “Why education is important to the economy, especially the local economy, and how business can help improve education.” June 2012. <http://investinginkids.net/2012/06/14/why-education-is-important-to-the-economy-especially-the-local-economy-and-how-business-can-help-improve-education/>.

⁴ Jones, Ken et al. “Vermont Population Projections – 2010 – 2030.” *Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development*. August 2013. <http://dail.vermont.gov/dail-publications/publications-general-reports/vt-population-projections-2010-2030>.

⁵ Driscoll, Elizabeth. “Higher Education: A Perspective of Administration, Access, Affordability and the Policy that Drives It.” May 2013. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/ksuls1366481730/inline.

⁶ Berger, Noah and Peter Fisher. “A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity.” *Economic Policy Institute*. August 2013. <http://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>.

⁷ “Guidelines for Home Study in Vermont.” *Vermont Agency of Education*. April 2014. http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-Homestudy_Guidelines.pdf.

⁸ “Vermont’s Education Funding System.” *Vermont Agency of Education*. June 2011. http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-Finance_Education_Funding_System_2011.pdf.

⁹ 29 U.S.C. § 794.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education. *Free Appropriate Public Education for Students with Disabilities: Requirements Under Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. (2010).

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/edlite-FAPE504.html#textnote1>.

¹¹ 42 U.S.C. § 11301.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Vermont Department of Education, <http://education.vermont.gov/flexible-pathways>. 2014