Press Release

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VSA & VCSEA Urge Data-Informed, Student-Centered Approach to Special Education Policy

In Response to Special Education Report Required Under Act 73

Montpelier, VT — The Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) and the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA) today responded to the Vermont Agency of Education's newly released *Current State of Special Education Delivery* to the Legislature, required by Act 73 of 2025.

Both associations commend the Agency's collaboration with educators in producing the report and urge policymakers to build on the analysis with a data-informed, student-centered approach. They emphasized the need for caution in policymaking when data is incomplete or inconsistent, warning that rushing to enact new mandates without full information risks compounding inequities and destabilizing the system.

That caution extends directly to Act 73 itself—recently passed legislation that weights the cost of special education services based on disability category, underfunds school districts relative to actual needs for special education, and focuses narrowly on cost containment without offering any improvements to delivery.

VSA and VCSEA stress that this is not a call to do nothing. We believe in accountability and in strengthening Vermont's system of supports. But accountability must be matched with the resources, consistency, and monitoring that make improvement possible.

Vermont's Inclusive Tradition and Cost Pressure Assertions

Vermont has long led the nation in inclusive practices, with 82% of students with IEPs spending most of their day in general education classrooms compared to 67% nationally. Yet the report shows that when students cannot be fully included, they are disproportionately placed in separate schools, at more than double the national rate. This "all-or-nothing" approach reflects gaps in the continuum of supports within public schools.

Staffing shortages and the reduction of designated mental health services—once reliably provided by public agencies that historically partnered with schools—are fueling these pressures. At the same time, out-of-district placement tuition rates continue to rise with little oversight.

"These dynamics—strained local capacity and rising out-of-district tuition costs—paint a fuller picture of Vermont's cost pressures," the associations said. "It is a mistake to view special education as the problem, rather than looking systemically at the conditions that drive these expenditures."

The Agency's Vermont State Data Profile Report from 2024 also shows that while special education expenditures have increased, they have risen more slowly than overall education spending. Between FY20 and FY23, statewide special education expenditures increased from $26,156 to $28,281 per student (an 8.1% increase), compared to an 18.5% increase in overall total expenditures. As a result, the share of total expenditures devoted to special education actually decreased from 21.5% to 19.6%.

Policy Without Implementation Support Risks Failure

VSA and VCSEA cautioned that Vermont's pattern of passing major reforms, such as Act 173 and now Act 73, without sustained support and monitoring, undermines their effectiveness. "We cannot out-policy our way into better outcomes," they said. "Vermont already has the framework for inclusive practices. What has been missing is consistent, equitable support for implementation."

Core Principles and Recommendations

Inclusion Is a Vermont Value
Vermont must maintain its strong commitment to inclusive classrooms, ensuring every student with a disability can learn alongside their peers whenever possible.

Finish the Job on Act 173
The 2018 law promised systemic improvement for all students, but implementation has been uneven. Full support for Act 173's instructional practices is essential before layering on new policy changes.

"The promise of Act 173 has always been about improving outcomes for all students by strengthening instruction and support in every classroom," said Dr. Meagan Roy, Chair of the Act 173 Advisory Group and a member of the Vermont Superintendents Association. "The findings of this report reinforce what we have long known: Vermont has the right policy framework, but without consistent implementation and adequate support, inequities will persist. We must stay the course and finish the work we started with Act 173."

High-Quality Instruction Is the Foundation
Special education needs often arise from gaps in general instruction. Strengthening universal design for learning and multi-tiered systems of support benefits all students while reducing unnecessary referrals.

Protect Federal Funding
Vermont must avoid policy shifts that jeopardize compliance with Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirements, which could risk millions in federal IDEA funding.

Invest in Data and Support

- Build a stronger state data infrastructure to monitor implementation and outcomes.
- Provide sustained technical assistance and staffing support to districts.
- Ensure accountability is paired with resources and guidance schools need to succeed.

Taken together, these recommendations underscore a simple truth: Vermont's success in serving students with disabilities will depend not on new mandates, but on consistent support, strong data, and a steadfast commitment to inclusion.

About VSA & VCSEA

The Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) and the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA) represent school system leaders across Vermont. Together, they advocate for equitable, high-quality public education for all students and work to ensure policies are implemented with fidelity, transparency, and sustainability.

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