

Vermonters for Better Education

*How to Choose a School in Vermont
A Parent's Guide*

Summer 2008

VERMONTERS FOR BETTER EDUCATION

Vermonters for Better Education is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization which formed in the fall of 1999. VBE promotes the concept that parents have the right and responsibility to direct the upbringing and education of their children. VBE monitors education policy in Vermont, promotes the value of educational freedom, and gives parents the evaluative tools with which to identify educational excellence. Through conversations with people from all over the state, and other grassroots activity, VBE works to expand education opportunities for all the children of Vermont.

VBE's activities and accomplishments include:

- A regular e-newsletter with more than 2,000 subscribers
- A web site (www.vermontersforbettereducation.com) that registers up to 5,000 hits per month
- A new lobbying arm, EdWatch, that promotes school choice, parental rights and education reform
- An expanded presence in Montpelier that covers the State Board of Education meetings, legislative work in education, executive branch actions, and more
- Expanded behind-the-scenes work with other educational leaders and organizations
- Liaisons with national groups interested in education reform
- Publications on education issues for political candidates

VBE believes that public education really means the public's responsibility to fund children's education. The public schools are merely *one* way to accomplish this. VBE is governed by a board of directors whose members include residents from around the state. Ed Watch is the lobbying, grass-roots activism arm of Vermonters for Better Education.

HOW TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL IN VERMONT: A PARENT'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a literary editor wrote an essay about the daunting task of choosing a school for his daughter, then just a baby. He would often coax her to sleep by walking around with her on his shoulder while repeating these words: "She's such a good girl. Such a good girl. And she's very, very brave. True-hearted, pure-minded, and she spends her days thinking high and noble thoughts." Where, he wondered, could he find a school that would teach her how to be "true-hearted, pure-minded," and capable of thinking "high and noble thoughts?"

As children approach school age, parents are confronted with that same question. And that question leads to a list of more fundamental yet no less complex ones as well:

What exactly is a good education anyway? How do I judge a school? Are test scores enough? Numbers of computers? Teachers with master's degrees? Can I afford to send my child to a private school or homeschool her if the free public school is not adequate? What is the best education for my child?

These questions are as complicated as they are individual, and a "good education" has as many definitions as there are children. For some, it means a learning environment where the child's natural curiosity leads the teacher. For others, it means a rigorously structured curriculum rich in academic content. For still others, it means a combination of the two with an emphasis on a particular curriculum component—the arts, science, athletics, or college- or job-readiness.

Parents and children are likely to be happiest with an education environment that best suits their needs. It's worth taking the time to think about those needs and what resources are available to meet them.

VBE wants to encourage parents who tackle these issues. The more that parents become involved in their children's education, the more likely students are to be successful in all their endeavors. This involvement begins with the actual selection of the school.

But parents face a daunting task when evaluating their children's education. By the time their children reach school age, parents usually haven't immersed themselves in the debates over learning and teaching techniques. For many parents, their opinions of education and school were shaped by their own experiences, and they approach the question of school with only those memories as aids. Memories of a special, caring teacher, a warm learning environment, a mentoring atmosphere that propelled them to achieve (or the opposite: a dictatorial classroom and unfair instructor who squelched creativity and fed self-doubt) color their attitudes when defining quality education.

These subjective experiences are valuable. In fact, they can help parents view the education experience through the eyes of their children. Firsthand knowledge of what did and didn't work

in their own pasts provides parents a useful launching point for an exploration of what is available among today's education options.

Experience works best, however, when married with information. So VBE put together this booklet to help parents sort through some of their questions and their choices.

While VBE supports academically rigorous curricula, we also recognize that one size doesn't fit all, that some children, whose home life already includes exposure to history, literature, and the sciences, might blossom in a less structured environment.

Therefore, the purpose of this publication isn't to insist on one approach over the other, but to help parents sort through their options and decide which is best for their children. This booklet is an overview, not a comprehensive look at educational approaches and curriculum choices. It is specific to Vermont, providing a snapshot of how education is structured in the Green Mountain State, the curriculum parents are most likely to encounter in the state's public schools, and the variety of options available.

We hope this booklet is a useful tool for Vermont parents and provides them with the background and benchmarks necessary to answer the important question: what education environment is right for my child?

OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS

Information on choosing a school for your child could fill a book—or several of them. This publication is therefore designed only to provide Vermont parents with a broad look at the issues surrounding the selection of the most appropriate education environment for a child. We encourage parents to use this booklet as a springboard for more investigation.

All educational issues—from how education is funded through to how the services are delivered—are complicated. We make no claim to providing a comprehensive look at any of these topics. Our goal is to present complex material as simply as possible, keeping the focus on the fundamentals, the basics on how education is set up in the Green Mountain State and what kinds of educational offerings are available to Vermont parents. Therefore, it isn't our goal to provide a thorough treatise on the state's education funding or governance structure or the nuances of different education curriculum approaches.

Instead, our goal is to demystify education in the state, helping parents feel more comfortable seeking more thorough answers on their own.

This booklet contains the following:

- how education is organized in Vermont;
- broad overviews of educational options in the state;
- how Vermont evaluates schools and students;
- what standards and curricula do Vermont schools use;
- teacher quality issues;
- special education services in the state;
- preparing for school visits;
- handy web sites and other references; and
- a list of “tuition towns” where more school choice options are available.

The information provided here is based on material gathered from a variety of sources—similar publications elsewhere, Vermont Department of Education resources, and the experiences of parents in the state and beyond.

HOW EDUCATION IS ORGANIZED IN VERMONT

Parents in Vermont are required by law to educate their children between the ages of six and 16 by sending them to a public school, to an approved or recognized independent school or a home study program. Otherwise, the child would be considered truant.

In FY 2007, Vermont had 324 public schools (including technical schools), 152 private or independent schools, and approximately 2,000 homeschooling students. The total number of students in the state, pre-K-12, is approximately 100,000. (Source: The Vermont State Board of Education FY 09 Budget Book)

Home study programs: If parents wish to homeschool their child, this statute—16 V.S.A. § 166b—describes what kind of paperwork should be submitted. In so doing, the parents are notifying the state that their child will be taught at home. This paperwork must include an annual progress assessment for each child. In 2006, a law was passed to decrease the amount of paperwork needed to notify the state. During the first two years of homeschooling, parents are to submit a *minimum course of study* along with the annual assessment. A minimum course of study includes math, reading, writing, literature, science, history, physical education, comprehensive health and fine arts. These are also the areas to be assessed each year either through testing, a teacher assessment, or a portfolio assessment. You can check out the guidelines for home study at http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_homestudy/home_study_guide_09.pdf

A few words about homeschooling: Homeschooling can be a very rewarding method of educating a child, requiring quite a bit of parental involvement. For some children, a classroom can be too distracting, for others too confining. Homeschooling allows for a more child-centered learning environment that grows with the child. There are many methods that parents can use to deliver education at home, ranging from a more traditional classroom-like setting to a more relaxed, less structured approach that allows the child to pursue interests with parental support and guidance.

Some parents are concerned about the socialization of their children if they homeschool. There are many local homeschool groups that provide activities for families and kids. There are also many activities and programs within local communities that parents can involve their children in. The local library is usually a good resource for community activities. These activities prepare children well for civic involvement and personal interactions. A classroom is not the only place socialization can take place.

Independent or “private” schools fall into two categories in the state: “approved” and “recognized.” These categories have nothing to do with overall quality, but rather, with the depth of reporting to the state. Parents choose private schools for a variety of excellent reasons, ranging from religious values to alternative curricula available only in some private schools. These alternative curricula include well-known methodologies such as those found in Montessori and Waldorf as well as others.

“**Approved**” independent schools must provide more information to the state in order to achieve that label, while “**recognized**” independent schools need only provide minimal information. Only “approved” independent schools with no religious affiliation can accept public funds, due to a court case in 1999 in which the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that the state Constitution does not allow public funds to follow a child to religious schools, even if the school is “approved.” Nevertheless, both “approved” and “recognized” independent schools, religious or not, are acceptable for fulfilling educational obligations.

Public schools are arranged into local school districts, usually by towns, and governed by elected local school boards. Residents of a school district send their children to the district’s schools without paying tuition, as is the case in all public school districts across the country. If

parents would like to choose a public school outside their district of residence, they will, with few exceptions, have to pay tuition to the out-of-district public school.

SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Vermont parents are fortunate to live in a state that is home to one of the most expansive **school choice** programs in the country – the 140-year-old tuition town system. That said, this system is only available in about 90 Vermont towns, those that do not operate elementary and/or secondary schools within the district. In tuition towns, if the parents wish for the town to pay the tuition they can choose among public or independent (but not religious) schools for their children at the 7-12 grade level. At the elementary level, or K-6 grades, choices are limited to public schools only.

Vermont, unlike many states in the country, **does not have charter or magnet schools**. These are quasi-public schools students can attend with no tuition outlay from the parents. Charter and magnet schools are often set up around special curricula, such as programs focusing on the arts or science, but can also be general education programs. The city of Burlington, as of this writing, is considering setting up magnet schools.

Vermont does have a limited statewide **public school choice law**, however. This law, Act 150, allows a few students from each public high school to choose another public high school as long as the high school they are choosing has a reciprocal agreement with the “home district” school. Under this program, choice is limited to a few students, and if more request choice than there are positions available there will be a lottery to decide who gets the choice.

Although the federal **No Child Left Behind** (NCLB) law allows students in low-performing schools (those not making “adequate yearly progress” after two years) receiving federal Title I money to transfer to other public schools *in their district*, this is not possible in Vermont where most, if not all, school districts only have one public school. This is because federal money flows to what is called the “Local Education Agency” and Vermont has chosen to define LEAs as individual local school districts for purposes of NCLB consequences instead of supervisory unions, with their broader array of schools.

No Child Left Behind also requires continually low-performing schools (receiving federal Title I money) to offer supplemental tutoring services to students. A list of approved supplemental service providers can be found at:

http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_independent/directory_101107.pdf

A great deal of information (and misinformation) surrounds NCLB, so your best resources are the US Department of Education’s web pages on the law: <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>

Local school boards do have the power to tuition students to public or independent schools, regardless of whether the town is a tuition town or not. But this rarely happens because local school boards are often unwilling to send money outside the district. The statutes that allow local

school boards to tuition regardless whether a public school is operated by the district—16 V.S.A. 821 (c)— can be found at:

<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/fullsection.cfm?Title=16&Chapter=021&Section=00821>

and

<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/fullsection.cfm?Title=16&Chapter=021&Section=00822>

In cases where districts operate a public school and parents wish their children to be tuitioned to another school anyway, parents will probably have to make the case to the school board explaining why their child's educational needs cannot be served within the district or at a nearby public school.

High school students have two other important choice possibilities in Vermont: technical centers or dual enrollment programs with colleges.

Vermont has 17 **technical centers**, schools associated with high schools that offer courses and programs in specific skills ranging from culinary arts to mechanical services. High school students who are 16 years or older may apply to these tech centers and, if admitted, may also attend the high school associated with the tech center for their academic course work in some cases (if the district of residence has no high school or provides no transportation services to the tech center from the "home" high school). The cost of technical education is borne by the home district.

For information on tech centers, go to: http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_teched.html

High school students who qualify can also take advantage of a **dual enrollment program** in the state which allows them to earn college credits while still in high school. Students first take an introductory course, offered every fall and spring, and then receive tuition vouchers for enrollment at one of five state colleges: Castleton State College, the Community College of Vermont, Lyndon State College, Johnson State College or the Vermont Technical College.

Students in tech centers also have the opportunity to earn college credit through a program called **Fast Forward**.

Last but not least, highly motivated high school seniors can spend their senior year at the **Vermont Technical College** tuition free, completing their last year of high school and first year of college simultaneously.

For information on the dual enrollment programs, go to:
<http://www.vsc.edu/SpecialPrograms/tabid/75/Default.aspx>

Homeschoolers can also take advantage of these programs.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Each school district in Vermont has its own local elected school board whose general task is to provide oversight and policy direction for the local public schools, among other things. In most cases, town voters can approve or turn down the budget of the school on Town Meeting Day in March.

Some school districts have joined together into Supervisory Unions, usually so that smaller towns don't need to support a high school on their own. A Supervisory Union executive board is composed of representatives from each member school district. If an individual school district wants to leave a Supervisory Union, the district has to vote to leave the Supervisory Union, also get the approval of other member districts and retire debt incurred as a part of the Supervisory Union relationship.

State and local taxes make up the bulk of education funding in Vermont. A court decision in 1996 forced towns to "share" more of their local property taxes with the entire state for redistribution, using complicated formulas, back to towns. This was done through the passage of Act 60. The legislature continues to "adjust" this system with subsequent law changes such as Act 68 and Act 82.

The education "CEO" in the state is the Commissioner of Education. He or she is hired by the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education consists of nine voting members and one non-voting member (one of two high school students), appointed by the governor for six-year overlapping terms (except for the students).

- Education law in Vermont is found in Title 16 of the Vermont Statutes and can be read online at: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/chapters.cfm?Title=16>
- A good source for statistics and information on Vermont Education is the State Board of Education "budget book": http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pubs/budget_book_09.html
- Home study guidelines and forms can be found here: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_homestudy/home_study_guide_09.pdf
- For a list of Vermont's PUBLIC schools, go to: <http://www.vermont.gov/portal/education/index.php?id=199>
- For a list of Vermont's INDEPENDENT schools (approved and recognized), follow the links at: http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_independent.html or go to: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_independent/directory_101107.pdf
- For a list of approved supplementary tutorial programs (available to children in low-performing schools that receive federal Title I funds), see the same link as for independent schools: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_independent/directory_101107.pdf
- For information on school district and board rules and information: <http://www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/pubs/schools.html>

HOW VERMONT EVALUATES SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

As you look at various education options for your children, you might find yourself floating in a sea of acronyms and education lingo—NAEP scores, NECAP results, average SATs and ACTs, Stanford and Terra Nova, to name a few. These are all tests administered in Vermont, the results of which should be available to parents looking at school options. In addition to these tests, teachers administer other tests in the classroom, referred to as “formative” assessments. Formative assessments are administered throughout the year to determine how well students are mastering material taught in daily lessons.

First, a few words about testing: Testing can provide valuable information about student and school performance. Specifically, tests tell you if students are mastering material and if schools are adequately teaching that material. Tests can also alert you to the possibility of “grade inflation,” a term used to describe an overreliance on easy grading to boost self esteem. If a student is getting all “A’s,” for example, in English class, but s/he scores in the “not proficient” category of a state or national test in that subject, the parent can suspect grade inflation is occurring in that classroom.

Tests alone, however, do not paint the full picture of quality or achievement. A test is merely a snapshot of what a child is doing during a school year. Tests are most useful as “red flags” signaling where there might be specific difficulties. As one educator once put it, tests should be used as a “physical” and not an “autopsy.” They should be used to drive improvement, in other words, and make healthy changes.

Some experts criticize overreliance on testing. They often believe too much time is spent on test preparation and test-taking in the classroom, and tests force teachers to “teach to the test,” thus leaving out creativity and time to explore imaginative projects beyond the scope of the administered assessments. Test critics also often cite population characteristics that might bring down overall test scores of a school. For example, they might point to a school with a large population of students living in poverty as a reason for poor showings on test scores.

It certainly is not good if teachers are spending inordinate amounts of time on the technical aspects of test-taking—how to fill out test forms, for example, or other process-related material.

However, “teaching to the test” is not always as bad as it sounds if it channels teacher and student to cover material and skills that are valuable and necessary.

And, while it is true that certain population groups might historically score poorly on tests, thus bringing a school’s overall scores down, schools should be doing all they can to help these underserved populations whose students rely heavily on schooling for gateway skills such as reading and math.

Some schools in Vermont might choose to administer some national “norm-referenced” tests such as Terra Nova, the Stanford Achievement Test, the California Achievement Test, or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. These tests allow parents to see how their children compare to students

across the country taking these same tests. Vermont does not require schools to administer these tests.

Vermont schools are required, however, to administer the **New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP)**, a test first administered in 2005 to evaluate how well students are mastering Vermont's standards. Vermont's standards are an outline of what subjects should be covered in which grades and what material should be learned (grade expectations). The official name of the standards is Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities.

Developmental Reading Assessments are administered in second grade each May while the NECAP mathematics, reading and writing tests are administered in third through eighth grade and 11th grade each October. As of May 2008, NECAP science assessments will be administered to all students in grades 4, 8 and 11.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is administered in math, reading and science to sample groups of 2500 students in the state. The NAEP is not an assessment of specific school progress but rather of a state's progress in ensuring that children are being taught basics. This test is often called the Nation's Report Card and is used to compare all states with each other.

When students reach high school, they might opt to take the **Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)** or the **American College Testing (ACT)** assessment, both of which are used by colleges to determine whether a student is qualified for admission. Because these are national tests, their scores can help parents see how a particular school does in serving its students compared to other schools in the state and across the country. SAT scores for Vermont schools are available at the Department of Education web site (address provided below).

Advanced Placement (AP) tests are also national assessments administered in high school but only to students who take AP courses. AP courses are college-level courses in a variety of subjects. At the end of the course, the national AP test in that subject is administered, and students who pass, or pass with a certain grade, can often have those courses accepted by their chosen colleges as completed college work worth a certain number of credits.

The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to administer statewide tests as well as the NAEP in order to receive federal funding for things like special education programs.

Information on Vermont's various test results can be found at:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_assessment/data.html#necap

STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

As noted above, Vermont's state standards are called the Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities. A copy can be found here:

<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pubs/framework.html>

Vermonters for Better Education

How to Choose a School in Vermont

A great deal has been written about standards, which make up the basics of a school and classroom's curriculum. Curriculum, in a nutshell, is what kids are expected to learn and generally how it will be taught, including the materials used. This booklet cannot possibly cover everything there is to know or learn about curriculum design or approaches to teaching. However, as with the other subjects included here, we will give you an overview and provide useful links for further reading.

Debate swirls around whether children should be forced to memorize facts and figures (a technique critics sometimes label "drill and kill") or whether they should instead be taught with imaginative techniques that place a heavier emphasis on creativity and fun (techniques critics sometimes call "fuzzy," such as "fuzzy math").

VBE believes that the best curricula—those that result in the highest-educated children capable of learning more in their lives and becoming productive adults—do emphasize mastery of facts, figures and material. In other words, teachers should be passing along to students specifics rather than opinions or vague concepts. This does not mean creativity needs to be sucked out of the room or fun activities ignored using this approach.

It is especially important for this kind of "content rich" curriculum to be in place in schools serving large populations of students in poverty. These schools are the primary, or even sole, opportunity for some of these children to learn important skills and materials.

Many books, articles, papers, and speeches have been written about curriculum. VBE encourages parents to delve into this subject further to see what techniques will suit your children best. At the end of this section, we include a list of web sites that might prove helpful.

As you approach curriculum analysis, however, it might help to start at the end rather than at the beginning. ***That is, what is the end result you want to see when your child is finished with a certain class or a certain level? What is it you expect your child to know or be able to do when s/he is finished with school altogether?***

It's not unreasonable, for example, to expect a school to teach your child reading basics by the end of first grade. Some teachers still use what is called a "Whole Language" approach to reading and writing that has passionate supporters but a growing number of critics who discredit this approach. An emphasis on phonics and what is called "phonemic awareness" (the ability to hear and manipulate sounds) is widely viewed as the best approach to reading skill acquisition.

Generally, the mastering of certain techniques and skills does require at least some memorization and study on your child's part. Your child needs to be able to recite the alphabet and know how letters sound before s/he can begin to master reading. Similarly, your child needs to know things like the multiplication tables and how to add, subtract and divide in order to work through more complicated word problems. These are "gateway skills" that can open the door to higher learning. You should pay special attention to these in the early grades because if these skills are mastered, children can move on to more complex material even if they do not have a particularly

good teacher or classroom situation. Conversely, if these skills are not mastered, problems with learning will continue to escalate throughout a child's school life.

Further reading on curriculum and assessments:

- www.pickyparent.com: Parent-friendly web site with great lists, such as “top ten signs of a mediocre school,” as well as a useful links page;
- www.greatschools.net: another parent-friendly web site about K-12 schooling with a great “Library” page of articles on grade-level expectations for children;
- <http://coreknowledge.org/CK/index.htm> The Core Knowledge web site which promotes educator E.D. Hirsch's approach to education; this web site is useful for viewing an excellent approach to curriculum and subject area mastery; and
- www.edexcellence.net: The Fordham Foundation's web site offers analyses of state curricula and other thoughtful articles about education; its audience is education reformers and activists, but it is useful for parents who want a more in-depth look at education issues.

SOME WORDS ABOUT TEACHER QUALITY

To be licensed to teach in a Vermont public school, a teacher must have a degree in education from an approved college or university. An “alternate route” to teacher licensure also exists for applicants without a degree in education. Candidates must still have at least a bachelor's degree and demonstrate proficiencies in other ways. For information on how to become a licensed teacher in Vermont, go to: <http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/maincert.html>.

Independent schools do not always require teachers have degrees in education but many independent school teachers do.

Teachers also can have special certifications, graduate degrees, and other professional development credentials.

Does any of this guarantee quality? Unfortunately, no. Just as with other professions, credentials do not ensure the certified professional will be good at what s/he does or be a good fit for you.

From a parent's standpoint, there are two general questions to consider about teachers:

- Does the teacher have a thorough understanding of the subject matter s/he teaches?
- Is the teacher capable of explaining the subject matter so that my child understands it?

For higher-level subjects, the first question might be difficult for parents to answer. Unless you're working in the field of physics, for example, it would be hard to tell if your child's high school physics teacher knows what s/he is talking about. But this is where test scores can help. If the physics educator teaches AP Physics, how many students passed the AP exam for the years the teacher has taught the subject? These scores might reveal strengths or weaknesses.

In the early grades, teacher evaluation should be simpler and more straightforward. Teachers should be capable of teaching your child to read and do fundamental arithmetic in the first years of elementary school. If your child is not learning these skills, something is wrong.

Teachers can have their licenses revoked or suspended in Vermont for unprofessional conduct or being found incompetent. State Board of Education rules require the Vermont Department of Education to list on its web site teachers who have had licensure actions taken against them, and the reasons for the action. You can view that list at:

<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/licensing/disciplinary.html>

For more reading on teacher quality:

- <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/teacher-quality/> -- Education Week's round-up of teacher quality research and discussions
- <http://www.abell.org/publications/detail.asp?ID=59> – The Abell Foundation's report on teacher certification programs

SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

If you are the parent of a child with a disability, Vermont, like all states, provides special education services. A round up of special education policy in the state can be found at: http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_sped.html

A downloadable guide to Vermont's special education regulations, laws, definitions and more can be found at: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_sped/laws/sped_guide_07_0917.pdf

Under state and federal law, children with a disability are entitled to a “free and appropriate public education” that addresses the needs of their disability. Services provided can include everything from academic instruction to physical education to counseling and beyond. Sometimes these services are provided by the classroom teacher. Other times, a specialist provides them.

Before special education services are provided, children undergo an evaluation to determine if they qualify or need these services. Parental consent is required for this evaluation. Once needs are determined, parents should be kept informed of the kind of education plan recommended for their child and the plan's progress.

It is important to note that children do not need to be labeled “special ed” in order to receive individualized attention for problems. Work with your child's teacher to determine the best way to proceed. Supervisory Unions will often have a “special education coordinator” on staff to help as well.

VISITING SCHOOLS, WHAT TO ASK, WHAT TO LOOK FOR

When you search for a school to educate your child, you are looking for an institution to provide a particular service. Just as you would when hiring any other service professional, you have to decide what is important and how to get at the information you need to make an informed decision. And, as with other such hiring decisions, sometimes it is hard to get an accurate impression of what that service provider will really be like once s/he gets to work.

In other words, even with the most meticulous information-gathering process, it is still possible to place your child in a school that ends up being a poor fit. Or perhaps you did not have a choice about which school to send your child to in the first place. Do not be discouraged. You can try to make the situation better by working with the administrators and teachers at the school (see section below on this topic) or you can ultimately decide to try again with a different school.

Here are some items you might want to consider as you look at schools:

1. Is the school neat and clean? An orderly and clean school at the very least tells you that the administration cares enough to ensure a pleasant environment for the children in their care.
2. How many students does the school have? How many sections of each grade level?
3. Does the school have a specific education philosophy? If so, what is it and can the school administrator explain it to you in an understandable way and in a way that indicates how course content is handled? What is the school's goal for each child?
4. Does the school believe it is more important for all students to be grouped heterogeneously (fast and slow learners together) or homogeneously (similar learners in the same group so that they can proceed at their own pace)?
5. Does the school have any materials you can take home—a student handbook, for example, or mission statement, or a round-up of test scores? Law mandates an annual report of the school, ask for it.
6. What textbooks does the school use?
7. What is the school's approach to reading instruction? To math? Here is a good place to ask about textbooks and educational philosophy, too.
8. What is the school's approach to discipline problems? Are there clear penalties for certain behaviors? Are they draconian or reasonable? (For example, will a zero-tolerance drug policy result in suspension for even bringing an aspirin to school? Will bullies be held accountable for their misbehavior? What happens if students are disruptive in class?) Law mandates that each school have a bullying/harassment policy, ask for it.
9. What is the homework policy?
10. How "wired" is the school? While numbers of computers do not indicate quality, it is a fact of life that kids need to be computer literate. In addition, there are many computer programs available for kids now that enhance learning and provide some individualized instruction for both fast and slow learners.

11. What kinds of extra-curricular activities does the school offer? Is there a band, orchestra, art club, sports teams, and/or literary magazine? Depending on your child's interests and talents, this could be an important consideration.
12. What kind of grading system is used—letter grades (A, B, C, D, F) or pass/fail? Letter grades not only provide you, the parent, with benchmarks of your child's progress. They can also provide the child with an incentive for achievement. Do the teachers provide comments about those grades? What kinds of tests are administered in the school? Ask to see a copy of report cards used at the school.
13. Is there a library—you should ask to see it.
14. If children encounter social or emotional problems, how is counseling handled? Does the school work with the parents or does it not notify parents if children have special problems?
15. What services/supports are available if my child is struggling but isn't eligible for special education?
16. What are the opportunities for parent involvement—is it just fundraising and “cheerleading” or are there opportunities to get involved in the classroom?
17. How flexible is the school about teacher assignment—can you request a specific teacher or a change of classroom? Remember, if you choose a small school, then you would not have this option.
18. How does the school and teachers communicate with parents—are there regular newsletters, meetings, open houses? If parents have concerns, how do they work with the teacher to resolve them?
19. How large are the classes? (A low teacher/student ration is not always an indicator of quality, however.)
20. What are the policies of the school board? Ask to see them.

HOW TO WORK WITH A SCHOOL IF YOU HAVE PROBLEMS

Okay, you have made your choice and enrolled your child in the school that you believe best suits his or her needs. But something goes wrong. Your child is being bullied. Or she is doing poorly in reading when you know she loves to read. Or he is mastering the material in class quickly and complains of being bored. Or her homework and test results are not reflected in her overall grades for the grading period.

What should you do? Sometimes it is tempting to immediately go to the top and complain to the principal or superintendent, especially if you have heard criticisms of a particular teacher. In almost every case, however, this is not the best way to start. Your goal in dealing with school problems is obviously to advocate an acceptable solution for your child. In reaching for that goal, however, you should be careful to treat those you encounter as you would want to be treated in your line of business. In other words, try to avoid needless confrontations that would create more heat than light. Stay focused on your ultimate goal.

The best line of action is to start with the teacher. In fact, strive for a good relationship with the teacher prior to any problems. When problems do crop up, try to resolve issues at the classroom

level first. If this is not working, the next person to go to would be the principal. The principal is the one in charge of not only the education but also the building, teachers, classrooms, and all activities that involve the school. If resolution is not happening, then go to see the superintendent with the final stop being the school board. Many times school board members do not hear about problems with the school. It might be a good idea to let a school board member know that an issue is developing and that you are working through the process. With some of the most serious issues, the State Board of Education can get involved, but only when they are specifically empowered to do so by statute.

Here are some tips in approaching school problems:

1. **Determine your goal:** Are you just on a fact-finding mission, trying to determine why your child is experiencing a problem so you can help him deal with it? Or do you have a specific solution in mind that you want to propose to the teacher? It is best to give some careful thought to what it is you want before setting up a meeting with school officials. Otherwise, you could be setting yourself up for disappointment, coming away from a meeting or phone call dissatisfied with the results. You cannot expect a teacher or principal to help you if you are unclear or not specific about what you would like to see happening. For example, if your child's test results do not reflect what you believe your child's abilities and skills are, your goal might be to determine what in your child's work is lacking and how to help bring it up to grade level. If you are concerned with your child being bored, do you want the school to consider advancing him a grade or offering additional enhancement services? Think through what solutions would be acceptable to you—and what ideas would not be. That said, be prepared to keep an open mind about solutions you had not contemplated.
2. **Arrange the appointment with the teacher:** You can do this by a note or phone call. Offer a few possible dates and times you're available if you have to leave a message or are writing a note. You might also give a rough estimate of how much time you think you will need to discuss the issue. This does not necessarily mean you are rigidly confined to that timeframe, but it will let the teacher know how to plan, and it could help you become more organized with your approach as you seek to settle the problem in a specific time period. As noted above, your best strategy is almost always to start with your child's teacher first with a problem, not going over his or her head which could possibly ignite unwanted resentment.
3. **Be prepared:** Gather tests and homework assignments if those are the issue. Review school and classroom policies to make sure you know what the expectations for your child are and whether this problem is due to a deviation from the policy. Talk to your child if necessary about the problems. Some experts advise that you let your child know you are talking to the teacher, telling your child what it is you will be addressing. This is a decision only you can make and it could depend on the problem. If the issue is grading, for example, you might not want to inadvertently bias your child against the teacher by alerting him or her to what you perceive to be unfair treatment—after all, you are hoping the meeting will resolve the issue amicably. But if it is an issue where your child's input

is crucial, or where letting your child know you're addressing one of his or her concerns will be reassuring, sharing news of the meeting could be beneficial

4. **Be on time:** If the teacher has to wait for you, you've already started the meeting on the wrong foot.
5. **Talk about your concerns calmly:** Even if you are filled with anger over a particular situation, you are more likely to get what you want by approaching the issue calmly resolute rather than passionately irate. First ask what solutions are possible and then ask for, rather than demand, solutions you want whether or not they were offered. If you have thought through your goals and what solutions you would like to see, ask the teacher if it would be possible to try your approach, especially if she has no specific ideas of her own.
6. **Set a follow-up plan:** Will the teacher report back to you or should you set up another meeting to discuss if things are improving?
7. **Consider what to do if you are dissatisfied:** If you are immediately unhappy with the teacher's response and are convinced that the issue will not be adequately resolved, you should inform the teacher that you are not comfortable with his or her approach and would like to involve the school principal or department head—whoever is next in line up the chain of command. You can suggest a meeting together or go to the other person alone, but letting the teacher know of your plan is common courtesy. Yes, the teacher will have the opportunity to tell his or her side of the story, but you should be prepared for that with strong points as to why your approach is more desirable.
8. **Thank the teacher:** If your meetings result in a favorable outcome, with your goals for your child being met and problems adequately addressed, do not forget to let the teacher know. Whatever the result, expressing gratitude for their time and consideration is always a good idea.

Some problems, sadly, do not lend themselves to resolution by teacher conferences. For example, your child's problem with math or reading could be due to the curriculum design and how such subjects are addressed within it. You are unlikely to get the teacher to shift curriculum just for your child. You then need to decide if you want to spend the time mobilizing other like-minded parents to press for change, or to make a change for your child by switching schools. You might even need to consider a change for your child regardless what you are able to accomplish with other parents. A systemic change could very well take too long to implement for your child to benefit from it.

Sometimes, too, a teacher's personality just might not "click" with your child's and you might want to request a transfer to another classroom. That's why it's important to know the school's policy on such transfers when first choosing the school.

CONCLUSIONS

Choosing the right education environment for your child is a challenge. First you have to decide what you want education to do for your child, and then you have to find an institution or technique that you think will best meet that goal.

Once you make the first education choice, however, your task is only beginning. For the next 12 years or more, you will be monitoring your child's progress, evaluating if the school continues to be a good fit and if you chose wisely in the first place.

Sometimes you will find your choices limited, either by the numbers and types of schools available, or by your own financial resources. Sometimes you will like the general choice you have made but have a rough year with a less-than-stellar educator. If this happens in the earliest grades, you will want to address it quickly to ensure your child masters crucial "gateway" skills that open the door to more learning. In later years, you might decide just to ride it out until a better teacher and better situation is available.

The school and teachers should be held accountable for the time they spend with your child delivering the education as set forth by the local school board. But the ultimate responsibility for the education of your child resides with you, the parent. Children who have proactive parents acting as their advocate simply do better in school.

As noted in the introductory comments, this book cannot begin to cover the vast array of material on school philosophies, curriculum design, testing, parent organizations, school improvement and more. But we hope we have demystified the process so that you feel confident searching for more information and more answers on your own.

If you would like to stay informed about education policy and legislation in the Vermont, subscribe to our e-newsletter by going to www.vermontersforbettereducation.com

QUICK FACTS

- Vermont state law requires you to educate your children between the ages of 6 and 16.
- You can fulfill your children's education requirements by sending them to: a public school, an approved or recognized independent school, or by notifying the state through the submission of paperwork that they will be enrolled in a home study program.
- You can send your children to the public school in your district and pay no tuition. With few exceptions, you will have to pay tuition to public schools **outside your resident district** or to independent schools. There are no public subsidies for home study programs.
- If you live in one of Vermont's tuition towns, your high school children can choose a public or approved nonreligious independent school and tuition will be paid by local and state funds.

HANDY WEBSITES MENTIONED IN THIS BOOKLET

- Vermonters for Better Education: www.vermontersforbettereducation.com
- Education law in Vermont is found in Title 16 of the Vermont Statutes and can be read online at: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/chapters.cfm?Title=16>
- For a list of Vermont's PUBLIC schools, go to: <http://www.vermont.gov/portal/education/index.php?id=199>
- For a list of Vermont's INDEPENDENT schools (approved and recognized), follow the links at: http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_independent.html or go to: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_independent/directory_101107.pdf
- For a list of approved supplementary tutorial programs (available to children in low-performing schools), see the same link as for independent schools: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_independent/directory_101107.pdf

- For a list of Vermont's tuition towns, see list below or go to:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_finance_data/towns_without_schools_0706.pdf
- The specific statutes dealing with school boards' power to tuition students to other schools regardless whether a public school is in the district:
<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/fullsection.cfm?Title=16&Chapter=021&Section=00821> and
<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/fullsection.cfm?Title=16&Chapter=021&Section=00822>
- For information on high school tech centers, go to:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_teched.html
- For information on the dual enrollment programs (where high school students can go to college or earn college credits), go to:
<http://www.vsc.edu/SpecialPrograms/tabid/75/Default.aspx>
- A good source for statistics and information on Vermont education is the State Board of Education "budget book":
http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pubs/budget_book_09.html
- Home study guidelines and forms can be found here:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_homestudy/home_study_guide_09.pdf
- Information on the No Child Left Behind law can be found at:
<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>
- Information on Vermont's various test results can be found at:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_assessment/data.html#necap
- Vermont's grade-level expectations and standards:
<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pubs/framework.html>
- A round-up of Vermont special education policy:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_sped.html

- A downloadable guide to Vermont's special education regulations, laws, definitions and more can be found at:
http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_sped/laws/sped_guide_07_0917.pdf
- List of teachers whose licenses have been suspended or revoked :
<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/licensing/disciplinary.html>
- www.pickyparent.com: Parent-friendly web site with great lists, such as "top ten signs of a mediocre school," as well as a useful links page
- www.greatschools.net: another parent-friendly web site about K-12 schooling with a great "Library" page of articles on grade-level expectations for children
- <http://coreknowledge.org/CK/index.htm> :The Core Knowledge web site which promotes educator E.D. Hirsch's approach to education; this web site is useful for viewing an excellent approach to curriculum and subject area mastery.
- www.edexcellence.net: The Fordham Foundation's web site offers analyses of state curricula and other thoughtful articles about education; its audience is education reformers and activists, but it is useful for parents who want a more in-depth look at education issues.
- <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/teacher-quality/> :Education Week's round-up of teacher quality research and discussions
- <http://www.abell.org/publications/detail.asp?ID=59> :The Abell Foundation's report on teacher certification programs
- <http://www.vhen.net/>: Vermont Home Education Network - Mission: To Promote, Lobby, Network, and Enhance Home-Education in Vermont

TUITION TOWNS IN VERMONT

The following is a list of “tuition towns” or school districts. These towns do not operate public schools. Children in these towns/districts are therefore “tuitioned” to public and/or independent schools. The “X” indicates what grades are tuitioned due to a lack of a public school at those levels.

Note that some tuition towns “designate” a high school and students go only to that high school without paying tuition. In some cases, it’s an independent school.

In the lower grade levels, tuitioning is to public schools only.

Due to litigation, no students in Vermont can be tuitioned to religious schools using public money.

If you use this list, be sure to doublecheck with the towns/districts themselves to verify information. Some of the towns on this list have very special arrangements.

District/Town	Elementary Kindergarten	1-6	Secondary		Designated H.S.
			7 to 8	9 to 12	
Alburg				X	
Athens			X		
Bakersfield				X	
Baltimore	X	X	X	X	
Barnet X					
Belvidere	X	X			
Berkshire				X	
Bloomfield	X	X	X	X	
Brownington			X		
Brunswick	X	X	X	X	
Burke				X	Lyndon Institute
Buel's Gore	X	X	X	X	
Chittenden				X	
Coventry				X	
Danby			X	X	
Dorset				X	
Dover			X	X	
East Haven				X	Lyndon Institute
Elmore	X	X	X	X	
Fairfield				X	
Ferdinand	X	X	X	X	
Fletcher			X	X	
Georgia X					
Glastenbury	X	X	X	X	

District/Town	Elementary Kindergarten	1-6	Secondary		Designated H.S.
			7 to 8	9 to 12	
S Goshen	X	X			
Grafton			X		
Granby	X	X	X	X	
Grand Isle				X	
Granville			X	X	
Guildhall			X	X	
Halifax				X	
Hancock			X	X	
Hartland				X	
Hubbardton				X	
Ira	X	X	X	X	
Isle La Motte			X	X	
Kirby	X	X	X	X	
Landgrove				X	
Lemington	X	X	X	X	
Londonderry				X	
Lunenburg				X	
Lyndon				X	Lyndon Institute
Maidstone	X	X	X	X	
Manchester				X	
Marlboro				X	
Mendon				X	
Middletown Springs			X	X	
Millers Run (Sheffield, Wheelock)				X	Lyndon Institute
Montgomery				X	
Mt Tabor			X	X	
Newark				X	Lyndon Institute
North Hero				X	
Norton	X	X	X	X	
Orange				X	
Pawlet			X	X	Granville NY Jr/Sr H.S.
Peacham			X	X	
Peru				X	
Pittsfield	X	X	X	X	
Plymouth			X	X	
Readsboro				X	
Roxbury			X	X	
Rupert			X	X	Salem NY Jr/Sr H. S.
Rutland Town				X	
St George	X	X	X	X	
St Johnsbury				X	
Sandgate	X	X	X	X	

District/Town	Elementary Kindergarten	1-6	Secondary		Designated H.S.
			7 to 8	9 to 12	
Searsburg	X	X	X	X	
Sharon			X	X	
Sheldon				X	
Somerset	X	X	X	X	
South Hero				X	
Stamford				X	
Stannard			X	X	
Stockbridge			X	X	
Strafford				X	Thetford Academy
Stratton	X	X	X	X	
Sunderland			X	X	
Sutton				X	Lyndon Institute
Thetford			X	X	Thetford Academy
Tinmouth			X	X	
Tunbridge				X	
Victory	X	X	X	X	
Waits River Valley (Corinth, Topsham)				X	
Walden				X	
Wardsboro			X	X	
Washington				X	
Waterford				X	
Weathersfield				X	
Wells			X	X	Granville NY Jr/Sr H.S.
Westfield			X		
Westford				X	
West Haven	X	X	X		
Westminster			X		
West Windsor			X	X	
Westmore	X	X	X		
Weston				X	
Winhall	X	X	X	X	
Wolcott			X	X	

STAY IN TOUCH...SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS!

Vermonters for Better Education is a non-profit organization. We produce a regular email newsletter on education issues and alerts on important education policy changes, and we have a presence in Montpelier monitoring education legislation, regulation and litigation. Our web site (www.vermontersforbettereducation.com) gets up to 5,000 hits per month.

We are one of the only education groups in Vermont not representing education professionals or policymakers. We represent parents and taxpayers.

Donations to VBE are tax-deductible. If you would like to contribute, fill out the form below and send it with a check made out to Vermonters for Better Education to: VBE; PO Box 255; Woodbury, VT 05681.

Even if you don't contribute, we'd like to add you to our mailing list. Fill out this form and mail to: VBE; PO Box 255; Woodbury, VT 05681 or **email us your information at vbe@comcast.com**

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____