

Recommendations on Policies that Impact the Youths of Vermont January 30, 2024

In 2022, Act 109 created the Vermont State Youth Council, now composed of 28 youth who represent many aspects of the diversity of Vermont's young people. The Council reflects the ideal that all are able to use their voice to make change at the highest levels, regardless of a vote.

The Council has five subcommittees: Climate Change; Education; Equity and Anti-Racism; Youth Mental Health; and Youth Voice. Each committee produced recommendations related to their focus area, which are presented herein alongside recommendations from the full Council "on the participation of young persons in Vermont's economy and keeping young Vermonters in the State" and "the preservation of Vermont's traditions and the future of Vermont's rural character, activities, and professions."

Young people in Vermont are diverse in many ways, including ideas and opinions, thus we hope to broaden input to inform our future recommendations. Nevertheless, presenting the Council's first recommendations today to the Governor and General Assembly of Vermont represents a tremendous step for all Vermonters, and opens a door of opportunity for many.

Respectfully submitted,

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Vermont youth will be living with the results of our actions today, so we must adapt to environmental needs to ensure a safe environment for youth in the future. Environmental science is constantly evolving and, with that, we are learning more about our effects on the environment. Therefore, the Council recommends:

- **Climate Change and other environmental problems should be a required part of the public school curriculum** in order to create a more environmentally-conscious generation.
- **Vermont should invest in alternative and efficient energy sources to reduce the state's carbon footprint by 90% by the year 2040.** This could be done through tax incentives and affordable options for renewable energy implementation, compost and recycling participation, and electric vehicle purchases.
- **Minimize vehicle and animal impacts by reducing speed limits and increasing speeding penalties in wildlife areas** in order to protect Vermont's animal populations.
- **50% of Vermont's state forests and bio-diverse working lands are protected by the year 2040.**

EDUCATION

All Vermont youth deserve to have access to high-quality, inclusive learning opportunities. We strive for all Vermont youth to have a safe and equitable learning environment, thus creating a more enjoyable learning experience for all. Therefore, the Council recommends:

- **Youth should be screened for dyslexia and other reading disabilities starting at a younger age.** This could increase reading scores around Vermont.
 - We suggest every year from kindergarten to third grade.
- **All students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504's are offered the opportunity to connect with mental health services.**
 - Suggestions include a counselor available to talk with students at least once per month.
- **Schools across Vermont must increase pay for teachers, staff, social workers, and mental health contractors who work within the school system** to ensure consistent, equitable, and livable wages.

EQUITY AND ANTI-RACISM

We believe all Vermont youth deserve to experience belonging and to have equitable access to opportunities to contribute toward community well-being. We also recognize many Vermonters (especially those with multiple marginalized identities) encounter systemic, cultural and interpersonal barriers to accessing these rights. We have focused our recommendations on education guidelines as we believe systemic and cultural change begins with education. The Council recommends that the General Assembly:

- **Expand the Vermont Global Citizenship - College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards Sample Graduation Proficiencies & Performance Indicator to include an explicit equity focus.** To learn more, visit: <https://bit.ly/VSYC-EAR>.

This recommendations is supported and inspired by the following resources: www.facinghistory.org; bit.ly/VTethnicStudiesFramework; bit.ly/CDEEthnicStudiesCurriculum.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

All Vermont youth must have access to high-quality mental health care. Therefore, the Council recommends that the General Assembly:

- **Allocate funding to build an in-patient eating disorder facility within the state** to accommodate the increase in eating disorder diagnoses seen in the last several years.
- **Guarantee students are provided excused absences for at least 5 mental health days a semester.**

Furthermore, we recommend that the Governor:

- **Advocate for Medicaid to be able to be used across state lines** so that Vermont youth have affordable access to specialized care.
- **Ensure that schools have access to more counselors.**

YOUTH VOICE

All Vermont youth must know they will be asked, believed, and respected in making decisions important to and impacting them, thus having a voice in their lives and communities. Therefore, the Council recommends that the General Assembly:

- **Extend to February 1, 2030 the sunset period for the State Youth Council to repeal Act 109.** Enacting this change would ensure the Council can continue to provide a platform for youth to be heard directly by state decision-makers and engage more youth and compel them to participate in the governing and lawmaking process.
- **Pass a resolution to advocate for and offer support to municipalities extending voting rights to 16- or 17-year-olds.** This change will give youth a direct voice in their government, allow them practice to become democratic citizens, and result in election outcomes more representative of the population.



On “the participation of young persons in Vermont's economy, keeping young Vermonters in the State, the preservation of Vermont’s traditions and the future of Vermont’s rural character, activities, and professions.”

More than ever, young people are looking to live and work in diverse communities with opportunities for jobs, recreation, and housing. Thus, the Council recommends:

- **Encourage development in large urban centers in Vermont.** Many young people desire a variety of economic and cultural opportunities beyond the agricultural sector. Focusing development in limited areas to attract more people will increase business opportunities while not infringing upon the state’s rural character. Diversifying Vermont’s economy in this manner would reduce over-reliance on the tourism economy.
- **Update the statewide real estate taxation structure to make it possible for young people to buy land for agriculture and forestry businesses.**
- **Reevaluate and update Vermont’s utility infrastructure to facilitate and encourage housing development with the goal of lowering housing costs for young people.**
- **Increase the importance of and educate about cultural and racial diversity in Vermont.** To attract and retain young people, Vermont must commit itself to building a more inclusive and open society and culture. For example, advocate for communities to support and increase funds toward organizations that work on refugee resettlement to increase diversity and attract additional labor force to the state.