



VFN Advocacy and Action

Mobilize hope and hearts for change.

CONNECT LEARN ACT

Vermont Family Network's mission is to empower and support all Vermont children, youth, and families, especially those with disabilities or special health needs. We do this by giving a strong start, lifting family voices, and advancing inclusive communities. Our vision is that all Vermont children and youth reach their full potential. The values which guide our work are: family-centered, respect, collaboration, making a difference, and accessibility.

2023 Legislative Priorities

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH



Expansion of Services and Programs - VFN will continue to advocate for much-needed resources to fund programs and services for children with mental health issues.

Families contact VFN concerning their children who need more support for their mental health. The residual effects of the pandemic continue to take a toll on children's mental health and well-being. Long waits in emergency departments continue, mental health workforce shortages limit program availability or expansion, and wait lists can range from three months to a year, depending on the need. Additionally, the lack of representation throughout the system contributes to the health disparities within the BIPOC community.

VFN will advocate for increased respite for families and peer support programs and expansion of evidenced-based therapies such as Parent Child Interactive Therapy, DBT-C, DBT, Trauma-informed play therapy, and psychiatric urgent care throughout all counties.

EDUCATION

PRIORITY

Equity in Vermont's High-Quality and Affordable Childcare System - In partnership with Let's Grow Kids, VFN aims to ensure that children with disabilities and special health needs are not left behind as the state invests substantial funds into Vermont's childcare system.

Families are often unable to access high-quality child care because of the lack of universal design, untrained early educators with the skills to support children with disabilities and special health needs, and the state's low number of available specialized and therapeutic child care programs.

Early support in all settings, including child care, is essential to the healthy development and integration of the children and families we serve.

Often, our families are in the most need of childcare, and Vermont must create a system for all of Vermont's children.

VFN will continue to lift family voices and collaborate with LGK and other early childhood partners to ensure equitable access to childcare.

PRIORITY

Special Education Rules - VFN remains concerned about the consistent delay in implementing Vermont Special Education Rules 2362 and 2362.2.5 and will proactively monitor this issue.

The Vermont Special Education Rule Changes rules were scheduled to take effect on July 1, 2022. However, the Vermont Legislature passed Education Bill H.716 delayed the implementation of rules 2362 and 2362.2.5 of the State Board of Education special education 2360 rule series until July 1, 2023. These rule changes involve adverse effects, the addition of functional performance, and the elimination of the discrepancy model.

Families, caregivers, and community members advocated for nearly a decade to achieve these rule changes because of the critical importance of early intervention. Without adequate support for a child's success in school, there can be a cascading impact on all aspects of their lives and future.

VFN is concerned about another attempt to delay implementation beyond 2023 and intends to monitor and act on the issue.



Early Identification of Dyslexia/Training in Education - VFN urges the state to develop or approve a reading assessment and ensure that each SU/SD provides the assessment as part of the district's professional development.

It harms Vermont's children when they do not get the support they need, including early screening and identification of students suspected of having a specific learning disability, namely dyslexia. Further, VFN urges the state to have the Educator Preparation Programs and local school boards to intentionally prepare preservice and in-service educators to identify dyslexia and educate students with dyslexia utilizing evidence-based practices. Any prospective employee applying for comprehensive special education reading consultancy, or early childhood and special education endorsement, should complete a program of study in the diagnosis and remediation of reading and language arts.



Legal Assistance for Families of Children with Disabilities - VFN continues to advocate for special education advocates and legal assistance to families of children with disabilities.

Parents are at a disadvantage when advocating for their children within the public school system because they have the additional burden of understanding complicated educational and legal systems and being caught between the personnel challenges within the school and the needs of their children.

Also, when parents do not agree with the school on any aspect of their child's education, their complaint options are 1) administrative complaint, 2) mediation, and 3) due process procedure. The administrative complaint process has only worked for some parents. Although families have found more success in the mediation process, each process does not have an enforcement mechanism. The due process avenue is out of reach for most families because the cost of hiring a special education attorney is prohibitive. While schools always have access to attorneys, families with few exceptions do not, making due process impossible for families to initiate in most cases.

For these reasons, VFN will advocate for increased resources and support to support parents to level the playing field and create more equity in Vermont's legal system. We urge the state to fully fund a full-time special education attorney position at Disability Law Project or sustain a bank of pro bono attorneys trained by DLP in special education law. Also, VFN will advocate for increased funding for special education advocates who can assist parents and caregivers before, during, and following IEP and Section 504 plan meetings.

SENSORY AND NEURODIVERGENT SCREENING



Expand Eligibility and Increase Availability of Screenings and Assessments - VFN will seek opportunities to advocate for increased access to screenings that assess the sensory profile of children.

Such assessments would include autism and Fragile X screenings, sensory integration inventory and modulation, and developmental tests of visual perception. Additionally, VFN urges that the state increases support and services up and through the transition to adulthood.

VFN frequently hears from families that there are long waiting lists for screening and assessment. Reports from families indicate that waitlists can extend to nearly two years, and some families travel out of state for screening and evaluation. The uncertainty and lack of access to support are overburdensome and place substantial stress on families as their child struggles. Additionally, the lack of diagnosis delays access to adequate resources, services, and support for the child and their family.

VFN will raise awareness among legislators and partnerships to elevate solutions during the legislative session.

ADDRESS VERMONT'S PERVASIVE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE



Accelerate Efforts to Recruit and Retain a Qualified Workforce VFN urges the state to accelerate and innovate to solve the workforce crisis in Vermont's education and human services fields.

This proposal supports measures to recruit and retain service providers in the education, developmental disability, and mental health fields. Severe workforce shortages over the past year in mental health, developmental disability, and education services have resulted in crises for many children/adults with disabilities.

Schools continue to face teacher shortages, particularly in special education, that affect students and their learning. Schools are in dire need of experienced, school-based personnel, and the state must act to address both short-term and long-term needs. Efforts must be made to grow and sustain the educator pipeline in Vermont. Similar measures should be directed toward staff shortages impacting those receiving mental health, respite, developmental, and adult services.