**Background**

In 2013, Vermont passed far-reaching legislation (Act 77) aimed at the transformation of public education. That was followed in 2014 with the approval of the Education Quality Standards (EQS).  At the heart of these initiatives are three interrelated components:

Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs), Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements (PBGRs), and Flexible Pathways to Graduation. **Personalized Learning Plans** identify the unique academic *and experiential* opportunities necessary for individual students to complete secondary school successfully and be well prepared for college or career. **Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements** replace Carnegie units, mandated courses, and seat time with “proficiency demonstration” systems. **Flexible Pathways to Graduation**recognizes that there are many different roads towards college, career and life readiness, including, but not limited to internships, mentorships, service learning, employment, community-based action research, online learning, and participation in arts, activism, and sports outside the school walls.

These educational practices are a response to emergent understandings that our conventional way of educating students - discipline-based courses, textbooks, standardized tests, and Carnegie units – is not only inconsistent with what we know about how people learn, it is an inadequate template for preparing people for the increasing complexity and indeterminacy of the 21st century. A consensus is emerging in the research about how schools need to change to really engage students and to keep pace with the explosion of information available at the click of a button:

* Students need to be at the center of their learning, with increasing choice, autonomy, and decision-making about what they learn and how they go about it.
* Learning tasks should connect with students’ emerging interests, questions, and passions.
* Learning should be characterized by interdisciplinary, integrated projects and authentic, meaningful tasks.
* Assessment should be formative, collaborative, and grounded in performances and exhibitions of learning.
* The student portfolio should be a repository of self-chosen work by which the student demonstrates what they have learned and how they have grown.
* Young people should have access to a wide range of mentors, both in the school and in the wider community.
* Advising students, building relationships with them, and connecting them to resources in the community should be as important to teachers’ work as curriculum planning and instruction.
* Parents are important partners in the development of young people’s learning plans.

The shift from a teacher-led classroom to a student-directed, teacher-facilitated model has the potential to change the fundamentals of schooling as we know it. It is this shift in the fundamental way of understanding how students learn, what the role of teachers should be, how knowledge should be organized and made available, and how learning should be assessed that characterizes this as a ***paradigmatic shift***, not merely a reform. The power of the paradigm is that it calls upon learners to set and attain their own academic and career goals and participate fully in the design of a curriculum of relevance and meaning to their lives, and it calls upon educators to provide the necessary supports and structures for them to succeed in this.

Systemic reforms include a number of factors which are being worked out on the ground as schools and districts struggle to reconceptualize curriculum design and development, scheduling, the changing roles of teachers, new grading and reporting procedures, calendar adjustments, community partnerships, logistics and transportation, technology and infrastructure needs, and to identify the kinds of experiences that constitute quality learning that results in “proficiencies.” Issues of equity, accessibility, and inclusion are increasingly recognized as essential components of the transformation. As well, many educators are committed to developing curricula that is responsive to the many challenges faced by our democratic society (including, but not limited to the climate crisis, species extinction, immigration, racial and social justice, etc.).

Many factors (nationally and in Vermont) are reportedly delaying or inhibiting implementation of the new paradigm: competing legislation, teacher union contractual issues, funding and staffing shortages, community resistance, insufficient professional development opportunities, teacher discomfort, and student confusion. Some of the complexities are due to the expectation that educators, students, and community members can easily make the grand leap from a conventional system of education that has been in place since the 19th century to the emergent 21st century paradigm.

The Occasional Papers are designed to inspire and model (through the narratives), inform (through the research) and facilitate (with practical suggestions) the transformation of schools on their journey to becoming environments infused with Equity, Sustainability, and Joy.