

Burlington/Winooski forum considers changes to schools

WINOOSKI — Imagine a high school where every student has a **laptop**, diplomas are conferred based on proficiency rather than completing seat-time in required courses, and all ninth-graders chart their own learning plan for their four years.

Sound brilliant and overdue? Or loosey-goosey and impractical? Burlington and Winooski students, teachers and residents pondered these ideas and other possible changes to their respective high schools at a joint community forum Wednesday night that brought an overflow crowd to the O' Brien Community Center.

The session was organized under the auspices of a high school transformation grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Burlington and Winooski jointly won the planning grant in 2010 and hope to be one of four applicants that are selected for a larger implementation grant.

Whether the two communities succeed in the next phase of the grant, the conversation thus far has been valuable, many speakers said. "It's exciting," said Justin Brown, principal of Winooski High School. "It's an opportunity to revolutionize education. I'm stoked that you are all here."

Change is needed at both schools for a variety of reasons, speakers said. The world is changing, and schools aren't keeping pace. And while the traditional path to a high school diploma works for some students, many aren't graduating with the skills to enter college or land a decent job. "It's working for some of the students but it's not working for all the students," Garang Deng said. He is a Sudanese refugee who helped emcee the event and was hired under the grant to interview immigrant and refugee families in Burlington and Winooski, which are hubs for the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program.

Several themes emerged from his research and conversations with more than 100 families from many countries:

- Parents want their children to graduate with an education and not just a diploma that might not be enough to help them get into college or land a good job.
- Some families believe their students are

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being pushed ahead too quickly based on their age, without mastery of the material.

Vermont schools rarely hold children back from the next grade level even when they are substantially behind. In Africa, things are different, said Beny Kiese, an eighth-grader at Hunt Middle School in Burlington who attended the forum. In his native Congo, students can't go to the next level unless they pass a proficiency test. "In my country, you can't go by age," the 13-year-old said. "You go by smarts."

The American system is confusing for some new immigrants, he suggested. "Here, if you do nothing, you're going to pass by age."

If Vermont high schools made proficiency on state standardized tests a requirement for a diploma, Vermont's 87 percent high school graduation rate (2010 figure) would plummet. Less than a third of all Vermont high school juniors pass the tests in all subjects — reading, math, science and writing.

Under the No Child Left Behind federal education reform, all schools are under pressure to improve, including Burlington and Winooski, which face extra challenges due to their higher poverty rates. At Winooski High School, about 75 percent of the juniors who took the New England Common Assessment Program last year were on free and reduced lunch, compared with 44 percent at Burlington High School and 28 percent statewide.

The forum began with dinner and

continued with small group conversation at tables and short presentations from teachers, administrators and leaders of non-profits that are partnering with the schools on transformation. Peter McConville, an English teacher at Burlington High School, summarized highlights from a recent survey of students and teachers.

Teachers said almost all students could learn the material in front of them, but motivation is lacking in many students. Students, meanwhile, often said they did not have a voice in the instruction that takes place in their classrooms.

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Burlington schools, said that regardless of the grant application outcome, Burlington hopes to move forward on changes under discussion. The school board is considering a one-to-one **computer** laptop initiative to provide students in sixth to 12th grade with school-issued machines.

Lily Weissgold, an eighth-grader at Edmunds Middle School who attended the

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forum, likes that idea. Her class at Edmunds is piloting a one-to-one initiative that's been a great success, she said. "It makes writing and communicating so much easier. You're connected to everything, everywhere."

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