ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE: POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, CHILD CARE, WORKFORCE & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

GOALS

1. **Make workforce training and post-secondary education available to increase employment rates, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills.**
2. **Ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care and integrate child care needs into the planning process including child care financing, infrastructure, business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development.**
3. **Develop and maintain a high-quality, affordable telecommunications infrastructure that provides the most efficient and effective as well as the least obtrusive system possible.**
4. **Ensure the availability of broadband access in order to increase economic opportunity and support economic diversity.**

ASSETS AND VALUES

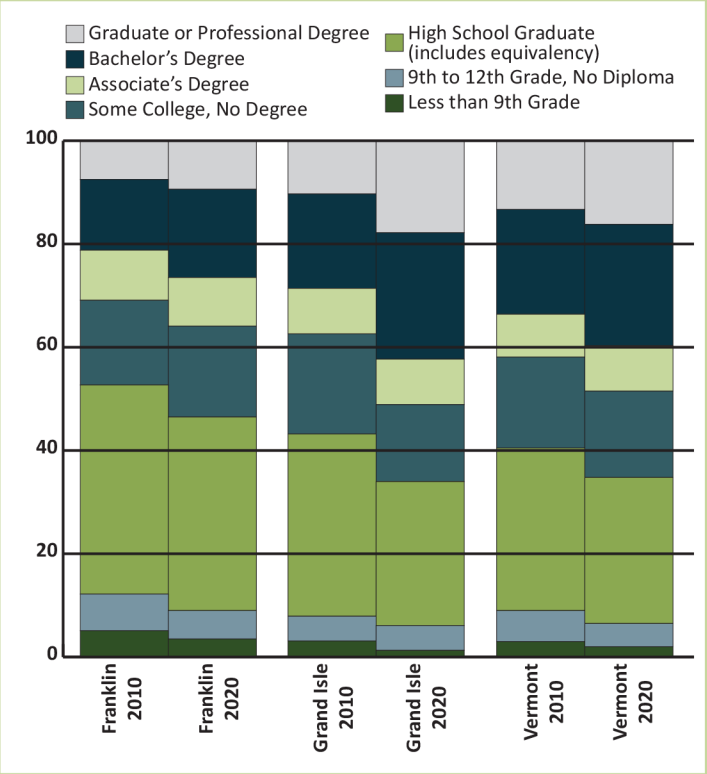
Education Levels

Students who never complete high school have a large impact on the region's long-term economic outlook. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the median income of persons ages 25 through 34 who had not completed high school was roughly $26,000.

Grand Isle County residents have educational attainment levels similar to the state as a whole. Compared to the state, Franklin County has a higher percentage of residents who have completed less than the ninth grade (though that percentage has dropped over the past decade) as well as a lower percentage of residents with a graduate/ professional or bachelor's degree (Figure 1).

Educational attainment varies significantly by race and ethnicity. Accurate regionally specific data is not available, but statewide data shows a disparity in

FIGURE 1: Educational Attainment - Residents Ages 25+ Franklin & Grand Isle Counties, VT



SOURCE: *U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census & 2016 - 2020 American Community Surveys*

educational outcomes. Native Americans fall well below that of any other measured group, with only 5.2% having a bachelor's degree. Asian Vermonters have the highest levels of bachelor's degrees but also the highest percentage of people who did not finish high school. (ACS 2018-2022)

Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Development

The phrase "post-secondary education and workforce development" describes the knowledge, skills, and behaviors essential for high school graduates to be prepared to enter college and the workforce and to compete in the global economy. Post-secondary education and workforce development curriculum assumes that students are ready and able to demonstrate reading and math literacy without the need for remediation. Table 3 shows the educational attainment of the region's residents.

TABLE 3: Educational Attainment by Race and Ethnicity

	White	Black	Asian	Other	Two or More Races	Hispanic
High School Graduate or Higher	94.8%	83.7%	83.5%	92.2%	95.5%	94.7%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	44.5%	35.7%	52.0%	34.6%	45.2%	58.0%

SOURCE: *ACS 2018 - 2022*

Workforce development is hard to measure, but it is extremely important to the continued prosperity of the region and for maintaining and attracting new business and industry. Incumbent employees who receive on-the-job training are, in general, promoted and receive higher wages. Newly trained employees who move into new positions create backfill openings for entry-level workers. The Vermont Training Program (VTP) provides comprehensive resources to prepare Vermont's workforce for new and enhanced positions. The VTP offers funds for the training of new hires and incumbent workers. Training can fall into categories such as on-the-job, classroom, or other specialized training. Grants can cover up to 50% of the training cost.

Vocational education is offered at the Cold Hollow Career Center in Enosburg Falls and at a number of high schools. Northwest Technical Center in St. Albans City also serves students in grades 10 through 12 who are interested in technically oriented careers, and it also offers classes for adults. Both serve as regional technical educational centers, accepting students from other school districts.

The Community College of Vermont offers educational services through a network of 12 sites around Vermont, including a campus in St. Albans City. Numerous degree programs and individual classes are also available online. The college is part of the Vermont State Colleges system, and it provides degree and non-degree programs to more than 9,000 students statewide.

Vermont Adult Learning (VAL) is a nonprofit organization that provides educational services for adults ages 16 and older who are not enrolled in high school. VAL provides General Educational Development (GED) preparation and testing as well as instruction in reading, writing, and STEM. VAL also helps students in a number of related areas, including driver's licenses, citizenship applications, and basic computer skills.
Many colleges and universities serve the region's residents in locations throughout the state, in neighboring states, and in Canada, including the University of Vermont and Champlain College in nearby Burlington, four

Vermont State University campuses, and St. Michael's College in Colchester, along with nearby Canadian institutions such as McGill University in Montreal. In addition, numerous accredited online colleges and universities are available to the region's residents. Online educational opportunities provide an alternative for students who cannot attend classes in the traditional campus and classroom environments. Ensuring that the region's residents have access to such educational opportunities is essential to the economic health and prosperity of northwestern Vermont.

Child Care

Quality child care services provide important benefits to the region by contributing to early- childhood development and enhancing children's social skills. Children who receive quality child care are more likely to have economically productive careers as adults. (see Table 4 for data on overall need for services). Additionally, child care services enable parents of young children to work, which reduces employers' recruiting and training costs for new employees following turnover due to parents' inability to obtain adequate child care.

According to the Vermont Department of Children and Families' 2024 market rate report, the average cost for full-time center-based care in the St. Albans district is $360.23 per week for infants and $296.55 per week for preschoolers, lower than the statewide averages. Even with recent changes to child care subsidies and payment level to providers, there is a gap between affordability and cost of care, especially for children younger than age three.

The number of child care providers in the region changes regularly, but there is a consistent gap between child care that is needed and child care that is available. In 2021, data from Let's Grow Kids estimated that an additional 1,000 children could be served if care was available. This need is especially true for infants and toddlers, since not all child care providers serve that age group (Table 4).

TABLE 4: Estimated Need and Supply of Child-Care Services in the Region

	Franklin County	Grand Isle County
Number of Children Birth to 12 Years	6,136	689
Number of Children Who Require Regulated Child-Care (estimated)	3,988	448
Number of Children Five Years Old or Younger	3,007	319
Proportion of Licensed Providers Serving Infants and Toddlers	64%	50%

SOURCE: *VT Agency of Human Services*

BROADBAND

Information technology is integral to fulfilling the economic needs of residents and businesses in the region. Telecommunications is the communication of information through various media. Information is transmitted

in numerous formats (e.g., voice, data, graphics, images, and video) over various media (e.g., copper wires, fiber-optic cable, air, and space). While this section focuses on broadband, it is important to note the region still has large geographic areas where cell phone service is unavailable or inadequate.

Broadband technology is a necessary component of the region's economic development. Broadband services can help increase residents' access to educational opportunities and resources, provide an interactive online marketplace for consumers, expand the customer base for businesses, facilitate access to higher-skilled employment opportunities for residents, enhance medical capabilities for health-care providers, provide access to health resources for the public, and contribute to increased productivity in the workplace. In addition, broadband services promote a sense of community through various online forums and encourage civic participation. Civic organizations can provide services to a greater portion of the communities they serve and create opportunities for new services.

The federal standard for broadband speed is 25/3 megabits per second (Mbps) of download/upload speeds, while the State Telecommunications Plan 2021 calls to increase the standard to 100/100 Mbps. The Vermont Department of Public Service has an estimate of the proportion of every town and city's buildings served by five tiers of internet service measured in Mbps of download/upload speeds. It should be noted that the actual speeds per premise are often below the advertised rate. Table 5 summarizes the five tiers of service and the number of premises served by each level within the region, as well as the underserved. (VT Department of Public Service, November 2022)

Existing types of broadband services in the region include cable, DSL, fiber-optic, satellite, mobile wireless, and fixed-point wireless. Broadband companies serving the region are Comcast Communications LLC, Consolidated Communications, DirectTV (600 MHz), FirstLight, Franklin Telephone, GlobalNet, Hughes Network Systems, Starlink, AT&T Mobility, Verizon Wireless, Sprint Nextel, T-Mobile, Mansfield Community Fiber, Viasat, and VTel Wireless. Coverage gaps can be found in nearly all municipalities. The most current view of broadband availability may be found at https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/broadband-availability.

In August 2020, NRPC assisted Enosburgh Town, Fairfax, and Montgomery in the creation of the Northwest Communications Union District and then provided technical and administrative support to the organization during the first two years. The Northwest CUD (dba Northwest FiberWorx) now encompasses 21 municipalities

TABLE 5: Five Tiers of Internet Service

Internet Connectivity 2022	Service Locations Franklin County	Percent Served or Better	Service Locations Grand Isle County	Percent Served or Better
100/100 Mbps or Greater	3,149	13.7%	5	0.1%
100/20 Mbps	17,897	77.7%	3,808	59.4%
25/3 Mbps	18,250	79.29%	4,421	69.0%
25/3 Mbps (includes wireless)	18,938	82.2%	4,676	72.9%
4/1 Mbps	22,740	98.7%	6,248	97.5%
Lacking 4/1 Mbps (underserved)	295	1.3%	163	2.5%

SOURCE: *VT Department of Public Service, November 2022*

in the region plus Milton in Chittenden County. Currently, utilizing state and federal broadband funding sources, they are active in planning and designing a community-based fiber-optic network that will provide universal access to all homes and businesses in the region (https://www.nwfiberworx.com). The focus is on unserved and underserved areas. The first phase began construction in 2024.

GOALS AND POLICIES

1. **Make workforce training and post-secondary education available to increase employment rates, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills.**
   a. Support efforts by the regional technical centers and others to provide training that is based on employer-defined skill standards and essential academic learning requirements.
   b. Promote efforts to provide individuals with the skills, knowledge, and abilities required to improve economic well-being and respond to changing workforce needs.

2. **Ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care, and integrate child care needs into the planning process including child care financing, infrastructure, business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development.**
   a. Municipal plans should include the future need for and supply of child care services, assess whether local barriers exist for the provision of needed services, and develop action programs to reduce any local barriers.
   b. Municipal land-use and development regulations should authorize child care services in appropriate locations convenient to households and employers.
   c. Employers, schools, and community organizations should collaborate to ensure that affordable, quality child care services are available to meet the different needs of households.

3. **Develop and maintain a high-quality, affordable telecommunications infrastructure that provides the most efficient and effective as well as the least obtrusive system possible.**
   a. Support FiberWorx, the Northwest region's Communication Union District, in its effort to complete last mile build-out of broadband infrastructure in the region in unserved and underserved areas.
   b. Promote Internet provider programs that offer reduced-cost broadband plans for families who qualify for the free or reduced-cost lunch program. Advocate for the expansion of these programs to more Internet providers.
   c. Support state agency plans to strategically improve infrastructure that supports improved cellular service coverage in the region.
   d. Ensure that the telecommunications system and related infrastructure fit within the character of the area as defined by the local and regional plans.
   e. Consolidation of new telecommunications facilities on existing sites is preferred over the development of new sites. New telecommunications equipment and towers shall be sited in the least obtrusive and least ecologically sensitive areas possible.

4. **Ensure the availability of broadband access in order to increase economic opportunity and support economic diversity.**

a. Support the development of a telecommunications infrastructure that enhances employment and business opportunities, high-quality education, lifelong learning opportunities and telehealth.
b. Promote affordable, universal access to high-speed broadband and emerging telecommunications technologies.
c. Identify and inventory specific technology infrastructure needs, such as telecommuting hubs and Wi-Fi hotspots.