



**STATE OF VERMONT
OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR**

Measuring what matters

**By Tom Salmon, CPA
Vermont State Auditor
March 4, 2011**

It has been 43 years since Robert F. Kennedy gave a speech warning us how poorly we measure the success of our nation.

At the University of Kansas, he said, "... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans."

In the State Auditor's Office, we promote performance audits as a means to better inform the public and decision makers. It is not just a matter of how much a program or function costs, but also whether goals are achieved, client needs are met, and high-quality government operations are developed and maintained. The truth is: government does a poor job in this area. There remains an urgent need across the country to utilize relevant, objective information to achieve transparency, accountability and success.

In Vermont, leaders seek a go-it-alone health care system, a public records agenda in the name of transparency, an emotional push to shut down a safe and reliable nuclear plant, and continued lip service to improving student success. A February 11, 2011, editorial in a major Vermont newspaper asked, "What do we want our schools to be?" This question arrives concurrently as we wrestle with the efficacy of standardized tests and whether they are the measure of success. Government has a long history of collecting data and measuring things that may not link to the true goals and outcomes desired by a society. We all want prepared and productive young people to compete in this difficult world. Do we measure whether 16 year olds have the skills commensurate with a livable wage? Why does the current governor have to team up with our state colleges to teach "teamwork, communications, work ethic, showing up to work on time, working a full day, basic computer skills, the ability to read and gather information, and some essential math skills"?

Can this evidence of an under-prepared workforce speak to the goals and measures of a government? Are we doing something to ensure a minimum level of economic competence that helps guarantee that our youngsters can protect themselves and pay for their life? A sad day for me, as a former teacher, is to bump into a former student that at age 20 has no skills, no plan, and no confidence. Standardized tests were just another reminder that they didn't "fit the profile" of a successful student and they ran with that label. Many of us who grew up in Vermont have friends who found success despite the stigma placed on them by their math, reading or writing scores.

Imagine if Vermont public school graduates and drop-outs reported in at age 21, 25, and 30. Tell us less about your NECAP, but where you are in terms of independence, skill development, certifications, and overall prosperity. Did we prepare you to advance in the world? In your field of aptitude? Do you vote? Do you volunteer? It is difficult to assess progress in any organization when goals, measures and targets are not linked to actual results.

I enjoyed Weathersfield teacher Peter Berger's Poor Elijah's Almanac this month. He is very candid about unintended consequences. This month he describes school reform efforts as "the cure is the disease." He then closes with "Our disease will worsen with the treatment as long as we refuse to treat the real disease."

Perhaps it is time to measure what we want to achieve.

Thomas M. Salmon CPA, of St Johnsbury is Vermont State Auditor and a licensed teacher. (please keep teacher) 2/25/11

1115 Railroad Street
St Johnsbury VT 05819
802 535 1555