

2018 State of the Union Essay Contest
Packet of Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Marjorie Parker (Woodstock Union High School Sophomore)

Second Place

Alaura Rich (St. Johnsbury Academy Senior)

Third Place

Oliver Minshall (Hanover High School Junior)

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Bailey Blow (South Burlington High School Senior)

Mason Castle (St. Johnsbury Academy Junior)

Lillian Cazayoux (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

Vijayata Dahal (Winooski High School Junior)

Paige Greenia (Missisquoi Valley Union High School Junior)

Kaitlenn Little (Winooski High School Senior)

Duncan McGrade (Champlain Valley Union High School Sophomore)

Jake McNeil (Milton High School Senior)

Lily Miner (Champlain Valley Union High School Senior)

Maisie Newbury (Middlebury Union High School Junior)

Jackson Noel (Milton High School Senior)

Hope Petraro (Montpelier High School Sophomore)

Zoe Prue (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

Ethan Schmitt (Rutland High School Sophomore)

Elizabeth Toensing (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

Ella Whitman (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

Name Withheld Upon Request (Burlington School District Senior)

Winner

Marjorie Parker (Woodstock High School Sophomore)

In our current day and age, I believe that one major challenge that faces our country is the prevention of hate crimes against minorities. One group I believe needs specific protection, especially with the new administration, are members of the LGBT community. With the recent military ban on transgender Americans, the LGBT community is feeling singled out and at risk. One way to bring a greater feeling of peace to these fellow Americans is by increasing protections instead of taking them away. I believe two major steps forward to help these people would be a law against employment discrimination for LGBT people, and also a repeal of “bathroom bills” which put transgender people at a greater risk of being harassed for their identity.

Firstly, on the topic of employment discrimination, many LGBT Americans face discrimination in the workplace simply for being open about their identities. In 2011, the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy conducted a series of surveys and found that 43% of LGBT Americans said they had faced discrimination in the workplace, and also found that straight coworkers say they had witnessed discrimination based on sexual orientation. One way to solve these struggles would be to put in place a law that prohibits employers discriminating against current and prospective employees on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. A law such as this could help reduce workplace discrimination and make it easier for LGBT people to find a hold a job.

Second, on the topic of so-called “bathroom bills”, all people should have a safe place to use the restroom, regardless of gender identity. During the Obama presidency, an order was put into place that allowed students in all public schools to use the bathroom that best matched their gender identity. While there was much push-back, this was generally a step forward for young transgender people. However, early in 2017, President Trump reversed this order, effectively taking away much protection for transgender youth. It is important for this order not only to go back into place for schools but also in all places. It is unfair and uncomfortable for transgender Americans, who are living their lives as their true identity, to be forced to use a restroom that does not correspond to that identity. This is not only an embarrassment for them, but can also put them at greater risk of violence in said bathroom.

All in all, I believe that protection for LGBT Americans is one major challenge facing our country. If we truly want to be an example of an accepting country, with protections for minorities, we have to be able to step up and protect our fellow citizens. Through the changes I have outlined above, as well as others, I truly believe that our country can start to be a leader in the civil rights movement across the world.

Second Place

Alaura Rich (St. Johnsbury Academy Senior)

As the country that leads the global economy, the United States needs the best-educated workforce in the world. Our nation cannot afford to be left behind due to a lack of fair and just educational opportunities. Yet, the educational system in America is failing to provide some of the brightest and most capable young people across the nation with equal educational opportunities: ones that are affordable for minorities who are of low socioeconomic status or are the first in their family to attend college.

As a member of Upward Bound, one of the federally funded TRIO programs that supports first-generation, low-income students, I have known for years that the cost of college was going to be a considerable barrier for me. However, it was my understanding that if I worked hard enough, I would find the means to pay for my college education without going deeply into debt. This assurance diminished after receiving my first award letter from a public, in-state university with notice that I would need to borrow \$40,000 over a four year period - \$10,000 above the national borrowing average - just to attend a public school within my own state. Many students like myself across the nation face these same financial barriers.

Although there are many major issues that our country is struggling to solve, our fractured, inequitable educational system does not fall short of making this list. The appeal of a college education has shifted dramatically from what it began as: rather than a means of developing equal opportunities for young people in pursuit of work-related skills and knowledge, it has become a societal expectation with a large price tag that can only be easily achieved by those of upper-middle-class status. First-generation, low-income students are left at a significant disadvantage. These students often lack parental support, knowledge of the process, and critical resources. Furthermore, their country is failing to provide them with the financial-aid system that they desperately need in order to afford a college education.

It's time to enact change within the American higher education system. We must make public colleges and universities tuition-free, end the federal government's ability to make a profit off student loans, substantially cut student loan interest rates, and allow low-income students to use need based-financial aid and work-study programs to make their college debt-free (by covering room and board, books, and living expenses). By taking these steps, the opportunity gap in America would see a significant decrease. Minority students would see the same basic right to higher education as their more advantaged peers, and the future economic state of our Nation would be in the hands of the promising young individuals who are currently being underrepresented in colleges nationwide due to a lack of support. The Declaration of Independence birthed the underlying fundamental foundation of our nation's belief in both opportunity and upward mobility, and it is the responsibility of the United States government to ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

Third Place

Oliver Minshall (Hanover High School Junior)

Income inequality is our greatest challenge, our most present danger and an existential threat to America. Our society is among the most unequal societies in the world, consistently ranking behind other industrialized nations, like France and Denmark according to the C.I.A. Leaders are taking notice of this issue, in 2013 Obama declared that making the economy work for everyone was “ the defining challenge of our time”. To improve the state of this great country, we must find a solution to the pernicious scourge of income inequality and create a more just, equitable and sustainable path for our economy.

An analysis by economist Edward Wolf confirmed that the top one percent of income earners, own 40 percent of the country’s wealth, the highest share in 50 years. At a time when we are among the most prosperous nations in the world, the bottom ninety percent has less wealth than the top one percent. Robert Reich has observed closely as the very building blocks of capitalism have been strategically manipulated by the wealthiest one percent and large corporations for their own benefit. Thomas Piketty discovered that modern markets tend to increase inequality due to the tendency to produce increasing inequality in the long run due to the tendency of capital investments to increase in value at a faster rate than the economy at large. Median income rose to its highest level ever in 2017 according to business insider but when adjusted for inflation the real purchasing power for many poor and middle class people is stagnant. While the sources of this inequality are far from certain, the deleterious effect on society is indubitable.

This is not just a moral problem but a threat to the future of American democracy. The political scientist Martin Gilens contends that while America enjoys many of the features of political democracy, citizens have so little economic power (and therefore influence), their views do not have any practical effect on policy making. That is an attack on popular sovereignty, a core principle of our democratic system. Piketty too, points out this trend, asserting that while some inequality is necessary for the function of efficient markets, excess inequality is detrimental to the long term function of our democratic institutions. Furthermore unequal societies undermine the very markets they are based upon. Inequality causes political and economic turmoil that harms society.

The solution to this issue is a comprehensive strategy to deal with inequality. We need to raise taxes on the top one percent, implement the Harkin Defazio Financial Transactions tax, remove the arbitrary and regressive cap on taxable income for social security payroll taxes, tax capital gains as earned income and use the revenue to fund new programs like free tuition, a public option in healthcare, and new infrastructure. If we embrace these policies and the shared ideals of economic justice, and political democracy we can transform America into a vibrant and equitable society worthy of the American dream and those who strive every day to realize it.

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Bailey Blow (South Burlington High School Senior)

At the beginning of December, a video of a polar bear was posted on Twitter by National Geographic. When people think of polar bears, they imagine snow and ice; however, in this video, snow and ice were nowhere to be found. There was only green. Polar bears are also known for their massive size. The polar bear from the video did not look massive or strong. This poor bear was weak and dangerously skinny. It could barely walk. Without snow and ice, there wasn't a food source for the bear to eat. The scientists that captured the video believed that it would be dead within hours if it didn't find food to eat.

When I came across this video, I was heartbroken. It was a hard to watch and I found myself struggling to finish it. Watching this animal suffer and barely able to move in a habitat that should be covered in ice opened my eyes more. It was a hard sight to see, but this video is important for everyone to see. This polar bear is what climate change looks like. Climate change is not just something that effects animals and their habitats, it's something that effects all of us around the world.

In the recent years, our nation and the rest of the world has seen an increase in natural disasters, warmer temperatures, a more acidic ocean, and a greater amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Climate change is not something that we can just ignore anymore. If we keep moving in the direction we are going, we will no longer have a healthy planet to live on. Time has not run out yet and there is still hope. If we begin to move towards healing our planet now, we can begin to reverse climate change.

One of the first steps we should take towards addressing climate change is getting back into the Paris Agreement. It was very concerning to most of the nation when President Trump decided to pull the United States out of this agreement. This decision was concerning because it gives the impression to the rest of the world that the US doesn't believe that climate change is a big deal. Scientists have proven time and time again that climate change is real and it is happening. By getting back into this agreement, the US can continue to contribute to the fight against climate change.

Another step that could be taken is more environmental laws. These laws could cover a wide range of things, such as using alternative energy to cut back on greenhouse gases in the atmosphere or preventing landfill from getting into the ocean. Our priority should be protecting the planet that gives us a home.

Climate change is more apparent now than it has ever been before. It is the most pressing issue facing not only our country, but the entire world. Something needs to be done about it before our only home is destroyed.

Mason Castle (St. Johnsbury Academy Junior)

The United States was founded as a democratic-republic in 1776. The implications of this system of government is that it is one controlled by the American people through their representatives. The fifteenth and nineteenth amendments were even added following progressive social movements whose aims were ensuring that democracy was for all Americans and not just for a fraction of our people. However, recent congressional elections have shed light on the threat of gerrymandering to democracy. While race-based gerrymandering was declared illegal by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, partisan gerrymandering is technically legal. However, it deprives millions of Americans of their full representation, and results in a system where politicians choose their voters, rather than voters electing their representatives. Gerrymandering runs counter to the fundamental values of a democratic-republic, and therefore to American values, so it must be addressed if we are to “secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity,” as the preamble to the Constitution says.

Gerrymandering occurs when a state legislature draws district lines so that they favor a certain party through “packing and cracking.” This is when votes are either condensed into a singular district so surplus victory votes are wasted, or broken up into other districts so that they are smothered by opposing votes. What results is that the influence of packed or cracked votes become less significant in determining the results of an election. This becomes especially problematic when the victors of gerrymandered elections gain majority seats during census years because they decide where to draw district lines. This leads to one party holding an overwhelming majority that isn’t necessarily representative of the American people. While this is a less overt method of voter suppression, it has proven to be far more effective.

In response to this issue, I propose that rather than having politicians draw districts, we use a neutral algorithm that draws fair districts that represent real American communities. This algorithm would eliminate the factor of human bias, and draw the most efficient maps possible.

Wendy K. Tam Cho, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois designed such an algorithm in response to the Supreme Court case, *Gill v. Whitford*, in which Wisconsin lawmakers’ proposed map eliminated any possibility of opponent victories. This violated the “one person, one vote” principle that came out of *Baker v. Carr*, in 1962 (Oyez, 2017). So to create a map that would uphold this principle, Tam Cho used the University’s supercomputers to draw billions of potential districts (Chamberlin, 2017). The maps that were decided to be fairest, were the ones with the lowest efficiency gap or “packing and cracking.” Using these third party algorithms, states can effectively make sure that every American has a say in politics, and uphold the democratic values this country was founded on.

Lillian Cazayoux (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

There is no doubt in my mind that the biggest problem in the country, as well as in Vermont, is the opioid epidemic. No matter where you go, it's impossible to find any community that has not been affected by scourge of these drugs. Whether it's an addiction to prescription painkillers, or dangerous street drugs like heroin, we need to dedicate greater resources to fighting them.

Opioid death tolls have been on the rise over the past two decades and began to accelerate rapidly in 2011. Opioid overdose deaths nearly doubled over the last five years, surpassing 42,200 nationwide in 2016. In Vermont the death toll was 100. Opioids don't care where you come from, nor do they discriminate based on socioeconomic status. Twenty of the deaths in Vermont occurred with people who had no high school diploma, however, an equal number occurred with people who had a college degree. No matter who you are, you are just as susceptible to opioid addiction. It's time as Vermonters, as Americans, as citizens who care for one another, that we take a stand.

There are two aspects to this problem that must be addressed and fixed; keeping addicts alive, as well as preventing more people from becoming addicted.

The big dangers with these drugs, are how easy it is to overdose on them, and the diseases contracted by injecting with unsterile needles. The first thing we must do is preserve the lives at risk, by preventing fatal overdoses. I believe the best solution to that would be to open supervised injection sites. Popular in Europe, supervised injection sites allow addicts to use drugs with sanitary materials, provide treatment consultation, as well as medical help in the case of an overdose emergency. With newer, more potent drugs on the market such as fentanyl, it's crucial we find a quick way to save these lives before thousands more are lost. These supervised injection sites would provide a chance to preserve lives until users can make the decision to begin the rehabilitation process. The main goal of implementing these sites would be to reduce the immediate health issues that opioid addiction presents, as well as attempting to refer the addicts into treatment.

The other preemptive part of this plan would be targeting doctors that over prescribe highly addictive opioids in unnecessary cases. I believe more stringent rules regulating these prescriptions could prevent many people from becoming addicted to these medicines in the first place, before they turn to the cheaper more dangerous cousin, heroin.

Attacking the epidemic from both sides of the problem could be the solution to saving lives from opioid addictions.

Vijayata Dahal (Winooski High School Junior)

America: The Land of Immigrants

I was eight years old when I immigrated to the United States with my family from Bhutan and Nepal. With us, we brought hope. Hope for better economic opportunities, better education, and a brighter future. Most importantly, we hoped for a country to call home.

Immigrants built America and it thrives because of them. The opportunity to migrate to the United States should be open to everyone despite their race, religion, and the color of their skin. Today, the President of the U.S. wants to stop immigration, deport 11 million undocumented immigrants, and eliminate the program that protects the children of illegal immigrants.

Like my parents, millions of immigrants have migrated to the United States for centuries. Some come to flee violence. Some want religious freedom. Some come to escape poverty. Some come to have a home.

According to Michael Shear of the *New York Times*, the president banned people from seven predominantly Muslim countries to protect the United States from terror attacks. Ironically, non-Muslims commit more terrorist attacks in the United States. According to Ruiz-Grossman's article in the *Huffington Post*, white supremacists, militias, and sovereign citizens carried out 115 cases of terrorist attacks on the U.S. soil; Islamist extremists executed 63 terrorist attacks. The President should use his power to find a solution to stop the white supremacists rather than banning thousands of innocent human beings who are in search of a home.

In the United States, there are approximately 11.3 million illegal immigrants, many of whom brought their children along. According to Jennah Moon of *The New Yorker*, almost 800,000 undocumented immigrants came to the U.S. as children. These children are protected by a federal program-known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). DACA allows the Dreamers the right to live, study, and work in the United States.

In September 2017, the Trump administration announced plans to eliminate DACA and gave Congress six months to come up with a legislative solution. The new development has put the Dreamers at risk.

Thousands of Dreamers have worked hard to attend schools, serve the government, and establish their careers. If Congress doesn't pass legislation, innocent children and young adults will be deported.

The U.S. should make background checks more efficient. America should not deport the 11 million undocumented immigrants. Instead, they should get the right to become citizens of the United States so that they receive the same opportunities as the legal immigrants. Finally, Congress should create a plan that allows the Dreamers to work, study, and live in the United States and become citizens.

Immigration makes America unique. Our nation was built and run by immigrants. Even the ones who are born here are all descendants of immigrants who came here fleeing poverty and violence, in search of a brighter future. The doors of America were open then, and they should stay open now to welcome the “tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Paige Greenia (Missisquoi Valley Union High School Junior)

How do people attain the goods that they want when the government makes them illegal? They turn to the black market. Now more than ever the United States is seeing a push to take certain goods out of the black market system. Right now, the major topic on federal levels is marijuana. Currently, several states have completely legalized the sale and use of marijuana, and several others are in the middle of making their decision. It would be in the best interest of the whole country to move toward legalizing and decriminalizing marijuana.

Actions towards decriminalizing and legalizing marijuana would make the marijuana trade, something that people that are going to do no matter if it's legal or not, much safer. The first way is that the government could set regulations on the growing and production of the substance. The government could establish a few trustworthy growers across the country to grow the marijuana to governmental safety standards and make sure that consumers don't have to worry about their products being laced with harmful substances. According to the American Addiction Centers, marijuana can be laced with dangerous substances such as lead, glass, heroin, PCP, laundry detergent and cocaine. In addition, if the federal and state governments worked towards making marijuana a non-black market trade, officials would see countless less drug deal related deaths and injuries. This is significant because according to Bill Conroy of The Narcosphere, "the number of people murdered in the drug war inside the United States between 2006 and 2010 exceeds the US- troop death toll in the Iraq war." If marijuana isn't part of the black market, there cannot be drug dealers who are willing to do anything possible to get their money. If users don't have to be secretive about their use, they will be less likely to be hostile and more likely to get help and the amount of drug incidents will decrease. If the government officials take marijuana off the black market, it will make communities safer.

In the interest of saving the government money, the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana can contribute majorly. If the government legalizes marijuana, they can alleviate the cost of making arrests related to marijuana use. After all, "authorities spend more than \$3.6 billion enforcing laws against marijuana possession" (Huffington Post), according to a frequently cited report by the American Civil Liberties Union. Fifty-two percent of all arrests made in 2010 were due to marijuana related incidents, and a staggering 700,000 marijuana arrests were made in 2014. As a baseline statistic, the average cost to keep an inmate in a New York state prison is around \$60,000 per inmate annually (New York Times). All the money saved by the state and federal governments could be more appropriately be dedicated to lessening the country's increasing national debt.

For these reasons, the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana for recreational use, removing it from the black market, would benefit not only our state, but the entire country.

Kaitlenn Little (Winooski High School Senior)

I am afraid to walk down the street. I cannot afford to spend mental energy on how I present myself in order to remain sexually safe. Instead, I focus on leaving a positive and impactful mark on this world. From a young age, my sex wasn't an obstacle in anything I did. I played with pink and blue toys. Stranger danger applied to all children. I played in the mud with a dress on. Then, I wanted to look like Barbie. I wanted to be rescued by a prince instead of saving myself. Children on the playground told me when a boy was mean, it meant he had a crush. Slowly but surely, we fell into the roles we were taught to follow. Today, women are coming forward and insisting that sexism is still an issue and I find that from the shallow strides I take in the presence of a man, this reality is with me, too.

According to *Psychology Today*, 56% of women in the United States are dissatisfied with their appearance. I've seen that young and old women will change their looks or even who they are so that a man will accept and notice them. Carolyn Coker Ross, MD says that how media portrays female bodies influences how women see themselves. She writes about the physical alterations women started performing during the 1800's. Women have put themselves in danger (through plastic surgery) to be "beautiful." Such behavior should not be socially acceptable. Biologically, humans look for traits in a mate that they consider attractive. We were not built to harm ourselves to reach that appearance.

Gender roles in the past assigned women to be meek. Although the roles aren't as black and white today, those mentalities are still common throughout media. People in power make it difficult to move forward. Planned Parenthood explains that gender roles can occur in different forms such as personality traits, domestic behaviors, occupation, and physical appearances. But there are also ways to fight back, such as pointing out stereotyping in media to help people become aware of it. Speaking out about roles that could hurt us will draw attention to the issue. Speaking up for victims of sexism will spread awareness. And finally, not strictly following traditional norms will open people's minds. No drastic measures need to be made in order to prove a point. Simply being yourself, no matter how you act, dress, or look, should be the American norm.

My existence is not to be blanketed by fear but to thrive as a woman who is beneficial to a world that is hurting. If we are silent, power remains in the hands of those who impose silence on us. Listening to the people who witness hate with their own eyes surely will bring some relief to American women who are afraid to stride with the confidence and strength they are meant to have.

Duncan McGrade (Champlain Valley Union High School Sophomore)

Today, the United States faces its greatest threat since the Cold War. It does not have a flag, or an ideology. It is unarmed, but deadly. It is the critical issue of our times. The greatest challenge America faces today comes from climate change and the unwillingness to act to stop it. The 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season broke records with 17 storms, hundreds of direct fatalities, and \$292,000,000,000 in damages. It was the first such hurricane season, but it will not be the last. Scientists are still assessing the unprecedented hurricane season of last year, but the Union of Concerned Scientists has made clear that new, unnatural climatic conditions have worsened natural disasters, and will continue to do so. With millions of people living near the Caribbean and the eastern seaboard, including in US states and territories, inaction is unacceptable. Funding must be provided to create, improve, or maintain storm resistant infrastructure and housing, and to treat the cause: climate change.

New climate threats are not only impacting the East Coast- far from it. The West Coast has been plagued with yet another series of un-natural disasters: wildfires. Wildfires are short but destroy lives nonetheless. In the past year alone, thousands have been displaced, and 46 people have been killed. Experts fear this is merely a harbinger of far worse wildfire seasons to come, and the mass damage, casualties, and displacement that they will bring.

Climate change displacement is not only an American problem, but a global one. Today, 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced due to directly climate-related events, according to the UNHCR. Many of these refugees have fled to developed states, which have largely failed in their humanitarian obligations. Developed states must do better because millions more climate refugees are expected in the coming years. Directly climate related catastrophes are not the only force behind the greatest refugee crisis since WWII. Outright resource conflict has reared its head, with resource scarcity and inequality an amplifier of other conflicts that directly impact US interests, such as the disruption of merchant shipping in vital maritime chokepoints due to piracy, a behavior fundamentally driven by poverty. For pragmatic and moral reasons, the US must address poverty at home and overseas. One way to manage this issue is at the source, by halting climate induced scarcity of resources.

Today, the United States faces a critical threat: climate change. The death and destruction caused by climate change is no longer a hypothetical. It is a current and critical threat to the security of the people of the United States and the globe, today and tomorrow. Climate change has already caused catastrophic environmental and humanitarian crises. The United States must halt climate change by subsidizing the blossoming green energy movement, aiding worker transition to renewable energy careers, correcting an anti-science culture, and re-entering the Paris Climate Accord immediately. We must act now because America's lethargy of today is humanity's calamity of tomorrow.

Jake McNeil (Milton High School Senior)

No Educator Left Behind

Vermont is a unique state that is comprised of small, tight-knit communities; these communities have a close relationship with local government. Teachers, a vital component to both the community and in promoting students to be forward-thinkers, help shape Vermont into the innovative and creative state that it is. Lately, however, there has been a lack of consideration in regards to the teachers who are at the heart of Vermont's schools and communities. Scattered across our Facebook feeds and blasted from our car radios are stories of local school districts' strife. For decades, teacher strikes have become commonplace, each with a lasting impact on the Vermont education system. The Vermont-National Education Association (VT-NEA) has recorded over 26 strikes in the state. However, this issue is not just relevant to Vermont, but every state across the country. Teachers are a fundamental part of our school systems and are influential in the development of future generations, which is why I believe it is essential that attention is paid to the underlying issues that spark these strikes. From underfunded schools and issues with employee contracts to unsatisfactory working conditions and hefty workloads, the laundry list of problems is anything but miniscule. We must do two things: open the door to productive communication by letting teachers air their grievances, and have school boards focus more resources on trying to resolve those issues. This will help teachers attain and deliver the curricula they desire by coordinating cost saving measures, all without breaking the town budgets. The students of America, our future generation, deserve an education without interruption.

We need to have teachers and leadership communicate constantly to get the schools and outcomes we desire. By engaging in productive, civil and persistent dialogue between all parties, teachers serve as models in promoting the behaviors they want to instill in their students, like myself, and the community: standing up against injustice, making difficult decisions, and insisting on being treated with dignity and respect -- despite such actions being perceived as very difficult and unpopular. In essence, continual dialogue among all parties is a more productive, and instructive, model for our teachers and leadership to follow. The process of continual dialogue will help all parties involved identify areas in the system that need funding by communicating and pinpointing the specific areas of interest: materials, professional development, and teacher contracts. This allows leadership to make informed choices about budgeting, which is a more effective use of limited funds.

Education is an essential service, and as such we must strive to make it better. As President John F. Kennedy said, "The race between education and erosion, between wisdom and waste has not run its course." We are still in the race, and by having teachers, state, and national leadership continue to work together, we can place ourselves in the best position to win the race. As Americans, it is critical for citizens to support the educators that shape our communities into the melting pot of growth and creativity that they are today.

Lily Miner (Champlain Valley Union High School Senior)

During this first year of the Donald Trump presidency, we have witnessed many questionable decisions being made for our country that not only affect us, but also those around the world in a negative way. One particular decision, however, has set our country on a path to continue the horrific damage being done to Earth. President Trump's adjudication to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement has left us as the only nation in the world to oppose it since Syria signed to join in November. The main objective for this agreement was to restrict levels of CO₂ emissions from each country. The consequences of Trump's withdrawal are grave, as CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have risen past 400 parts per million—levels that are already superseding what Earth can handle to support the flora and fauna living on it. Continuing this trend will most likely result in a mass extinction event.

Hearing the White House argue that removing us from the agreement will help boost our economy filled much of the American public as well as climate experts around the globe with a sense of outrage. We have already accumulated a surplus of evidence that manmade climate change is having a drastic negative impact. In the past two decades, sea levels have risen at a rate of .13 inches, which is twice the rate of the past century. From 1992 to 2011, Greenland lost 152 billion tons of ice per year, West Antarctica lost 65 billion per year, and the Antarctic Peninsula lost 20 billion per year. Increased intensity in extreme weather including hurricanes, floods, and snowstorms has been recorded since the 1950's. These are just a fraction of the plethora of examples. Given the massive amount of damage that has already been done, how can it be justified to place the economy as a higher priority?

This choice is especially irresponsible when considering the fact that the United States produces more excess CO₂ than any other country. While there are many factors to blame, one of the largest and least necessary of these is the use of fossil fuels. They provide 81% of the energy in the United States, yet they are both incredibly harmful and incredibly easy to replace. A change needs to be made.

It is imperative that we as a global superpower begin to invest in renewable energy such as wind and solar. Many economists agree that the long term benefits from switching to renewable energy would outweigh the short term costs, improving the economy through more environmentally sound means. Certainly a more competent course of action than removing ourselves from the Paris Agreement. Though the cost of installation for these methods are pricier than more conventional ones, they have no fuel costs once they are functioning and the maintenance costs are cheaper. The United States has not only the resources, but the duty to fight against these issues. We need to combat this now, because we will not be given a second chance later.

Maisie Newbury (Middlebury Union High School Junior)

“Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had” (The Great Gatsby, p.1) This was one of my father’s favorite quotes when I was growing up. He always cautioned me to think before I spoke or better yet, “think before you think.” While some might call this inauthentic, my father called it sensible.

I am not blind to the privilege I possess. Though, living in the big house atop the hill with my two healthy, living parents in the sheltered town of Weybridge, Vermont, it would be an easy thing to forget--if it weren’t for my brother, Robbie.

Robbie does not talk much. He cannot read. He cannot write. He has “Severe, Regressive Autism,” a developmental disorder that inhibits his literacy and communication skills. When I was younger, my parents explained to me that the world looked different to Robbie. It was louder, brighter and so much bigger. Living with Robbie, I am constantly reminded of my privilege. Every time I speak, run, ski, read, write... I’m doing something that he cannot. All the things I do on a daily basis are insurmountable obstacles to him. Yet, even without these luxuries, my brother smiles and laughs-- he enjoys his life and his experience because he owns it. No one should be allowed to take that from him.

Yet, my brother’s access to the care he needs has decreased immensely in the last year. His weekly appointments with his occupational therapist, which used to be covered by insurance, are now unaffordable as my parents must continue supporting him in their retirement. Learning this, I was upset. How could something so fundamental be removed from our insurance policy without a second thought?

In our society, mental health challenges are often dismissed as illegitimate and fixable. Words like psycho, idiot and lunatic, are thrown around as diminutive insults rather than seen as impactful and potentially harmful. Because of this, mental healthcare is considered a luxury rather than a necessity, and therefore not something that should be covered by insurance.

The union we live in does not value mental healthcare simply because society does not. This issue starts with us. I cannot stay silent and watch my parents sacrifice my brother’s future stability and independence in order to be able to support him in the long run; nor can I do this alone. I know that until society begins placing value on the lives of people like Robbie, no one will-- especially not large-scale insurance providers. However, I believe that there are other people like me who, if we band together, can create a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens ready to take on the world. For, unlike my brother, my privilege has given me a voice, and it is my duty to use it to fight for him. I owe him that much.

Jackson Noel (Milton High School Senior)

With a nation as large as the United States there is a constant stream of issues and problems that require addressing. This means that the most important issues are those that involve the largest portion of the United States population. In that way, the biggest issue that the United States should currently focus on is making sure that every American can afford and has access to healthcare.

Every American should have the right to healthcare, as wealth should not determine quality of life. Healthcare is an incredibly important aspect of everyone's lives as it allows them to live without worrying about not having access to critical care and treatment to thrive. In this way, the solution to this problem is the maintaining and constant adjusting of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) to best suit and assist the American people. The benefits the Affordable Care Act is deceptively simple in that more Americans would be able to afford and hold onto healthcare. This means that they would be able to live a better life and be better functioning members of society. The Affordable Care Act has proven to be a legitimate solution since it has been enacted under the Obama administration. According to the New York Times, the number of Americans without healthcare is "down by 25 percent." This shows that the Affordable Care Act is effective at achieving its goals.

There are many people who believe that the United States government should play no role in healthcare, this is a flawed perspective. The goal is insure as many American citizens as possible it makes the most sense to have defined government regulation. One belief is that there should be a free market for health insurance, allowing companies to compete to provide the best system to benefit the people. There are many problems with a free market healthcare system that stops it from being helpful and most useful for the American people. A free market is not designed to allow for everyone to have insurance, but rather people who can afford it having better access. This is not beneficial on the national scale and leads to a large imbalance of power. There are also numerous flaws in the current American approach to health care. For one, even when someone is insured there are upfront fees and payments before insurance kicks in. This means that someone who is insured might not be able to pay these fees causing them to be financially burdened by bills even with insurance.

Universal government health care has proven to be a sufficient solution to the problem of health care. For example, Switzerland has universal health care and a per capita health expenditures of \$1879, compared to America's \$4160. Meaning that the United States is spending more money on less.

Making sure that this is available and maintained under the Trump administration is important in the path towards accessible health insurance. No one should ever die because they cannot afford treatment.

Hope Petraro (Montpelier High School Sophomore)

Commitment to democracy is the founding principal of the United States of America - embedded in the fabric of our nation, the crown jewel of our proverbial crown. A constitutional federal republic, with a system of checks and balances, is an assurance to constituents that they each have a seat at the table. Yet in practice, this has proven to be nothing but a promising facade. Gerrymandering, voter suppression, and “money in politics” are not a threat to our democracy — they define American democracy. The disproportionate influence of wealthy individuals and corporations in elections and in the legislative process has muddled an honest definition of democracy in our nation while simultaneously becoming it. However, America’s commitment to tried-and-true methods does not necessitate lack of reception to positive change.

Campaigns will always include campaign financing, as the distribution of information to voters is dependent upon systems that require funding. In addition, campaign contributions, whether by individuals or corporations, can rightfully be considered an exercise of the First Amendment right to free speech. However, refusal to set donation limits violates the grounds of equality upon which such freedom of speech is conducted, and can arguably censor and repress the speech of the less wealthy as it greatly diminishes their relative influence. Unfortunately, Citizens United and the subsequent SpeechNow allow donors to make unlimited donations to super PACS. This includes money donated by foreign entities, possibly anonymously as “dark money”. Moreover, these expenditures aren’t verifiably independent from candidates. Collusion between super PACS, often created by associates of candidates and candidates themselves, is rarely, if ever, regulated. In addition, it is hypocritical to argue, in the name of free speech, that donors can contribute an unlimited amount to expenditures but that those expenditures must remain independent. Citizens United, SpeechNow, and the additional McCutcheon rulings have nearly neutralized the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, adding a somewhat plutocratic influence upon the electoral process and American democracy as a whole.

This issue is multi-partisan. According to Gallup Poll, the greatest majority of Americans cite dissatisfaction with the government and poor leadership as our nation’s most important issue. A September 2015 Bloomberg poll found that about 80 percent of Republicans and Democrats alike oppose Citizens United. This overarching dissatisfaction can be ameliorated by working to keep elections in the hands of the American people. Political groups, such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and ALEC, were able to influence elections before Citizens United, SpeechNow, and McCutcheon, and are able to influence the legislative process, respectively. However, it’s important for Americans to avoid demoralization, understanding that the first step to achieving a republic free of corruption rests in truly democratic elections. A true democracy can be achieved by restoring the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, strengthening campaign-finance regulations, and supporting public campaign-financing initiatives. We, the American people, must decide our destiny, and our elections should remind each American that their voices prevail.

Zoe Prue (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

The United States is distinguished by the values that are deeply embedded in our culture and economy. Americans place emphasis on individual initiative and self-created success. These ideas are evident in the Constitution, its amendments, and various institutions. Their derivation is best seen in a famous phrase written in the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Captured in these seven words are the ubiquitous values of our nation.

Our focus on individually created prosperity is manifested by capitalism and the free market. However, these are not conducive to always guaranteeing protections like healthcare for our most vulnerable citizens. In America, there are families stymied in an unrelenting cycle of poverty, and they are incapable of rising out of the cycle for a myriad of factors. For example, access to education and vocational training, discrimination (especially for marginalized communities), higher incarceration rates, low salaries/wages, and lack of jobs. Impoverished people have difficulties paying for the bare minimums like housing, food, and heat. Consequently, families rarely find any spare money to spend on healthcare.

This is an issue because, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 15 million children in the United States live below the federal poverty line. There are millions of children who do not receive regular physical check-ups, necessary optometry appointments, or dental care. Children and adolescents are suffering from health problems that impact their quality of life. Many treatable ailments require simple fixes such as glasses to see the board, fillings for painful cavities, medicine for illnesses, or inhalers for asthma. It is within our capacity to fix these problems, so why are we not? We should be concerned about the health of our nation’s citizens as it is one of the most important issues facing the U.S. today.

There is an inescapable need for affordable and accessible health care for the American public. The lasting impacts of affordable healthcare would be monumental. When we invest in the health and livelihoods of the next generation of Americans, we are investing in the next generation of our workforce. Healthier people results in more able workers, who by extension, are able to support their own families. It is one of the best methods to combatting the poverty cycle.

We characterize our nation by our belief in individualism and independence. However, when we see a system that is relentlessly unforgiving towards people in poverty, the most productive conclusion to come to is that we have to start taking care of our neighbors. The cycle disempowers them; it strips them of the ability to pay for necessities like healthcare. This is why affordable healthcare needs to be obtainable for all Americans.

Instead of repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act, it should be expanded upon. The government should fund programs to offer reasonably priced healthcare to Americans. Doing so would create a lasting solution to poor citizens being unable to access healthcare. The quality of life for millions of Americans would be improved.

Ethan Schmitt (Rutland High School Sophomore)

I am the grandson of a card-carrying member of the National Rifle Association. I support the United States Constitution and all of its amendments. Despite this, I believe that the way our country's officials have interpreted the Second Amendment has created the foundation for many mass shootings, which have claimed the lives of countless innocent civilians.

A price cannot be assigned for the lives lost due to this awfully dangerous policy of our country; every time another person dies due to homicide, another family is torn apart. Many children have been killed, particularly in church and school shootings. And even in cases where there are children who haven't been physically impacted by the mass shootings, they may have lost a loved one which will take a toll on them mentally and emotionally for the rest of their lives.

The universal definition of the term mass shooting is when four or more people are injured or killed in a single event at the same time and location. According to theguardian.com, there have been 1,516 mass shootings in the past 1,735 days before October 1, 2017, the date of the mass shooting that took place at the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas. A total of 1,719 people have died as a result of these mass shootings, while an additional 6,510 were injured. The gun at the forefront of these mass shootings was the semi-automatic rifle, which has the ability to shoot a round, and automatically reload with another round that is fired with an additional pull of the trigger. Despite the National Rifle Association's attempts to defend such a weapon as a gun mostly used for hunting purposes, there is no need for this hazardous assault weapon in order to successfully hunt.

In addition, devices known as bump stocks are used to simulate the speed of fire similar to that of an automatic weapon for a semi-automatic weapon. An automatic weapon has the ability to fire multiple rounds of ammunition by only pulling the trigger of a gun once, and are more commonly known as machine guns. The American people have been prohibited from the use of these weapons with the passing of the National Firearms Act in 1934. However, bump stocks have not been banned, and the result of this have been conflicts such as the mass shooting in Las Vegas where the gunman successfully attached these devices to 23 of his semi-automatic rifles, and used them to kill 58 people, which resulted in the most devastating shooting in US history.

The solution to this mass shooting epidemic is clear. Congress must use rationality and act as a bipartisan group to pass a bill which regulates the use of semi-automatic weapons and bump stocks which have both been used with frequency in a multitude of mass shootings across the United States. American citizens have the right to bear arms, but not with weapons that have no purpose in hunting, target practice, or even self-defense.

Elizabeth Toensing (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

Financial Help is Hope for Opioid Abusers

My fellow Americans...

On a summer Saturday morning, I was driving into Burlington. At a stop light, I looked over at a church to my right. A man, in his early twenties was sitting on the steps. He was shivering ferociously, yelling at god, and begging for help. His tremors were not from cold. He was shaking from withdrawal. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and soaked his shirt. His body was unable to handle the side effects of withdrawal. He was a heroin addict. This homeless man with torn clothing, could not access a treatment center. His last ditch effort was to sit on the steps of a church and pray, scream, for a miracle.

A miracle is “a highly improbable or extraordinary event, development, or accomplishment that brings very welcome consequences” (Miracle). Miracles are meant for things we cannot control, not things we can control like making help available for drug addicts.

By funding public drug rehabilitation centers, we can help drug addicts to recover from their addictions. No addicts can do it alone and adequate support is the only way to help with these problems.

An analysis from Blue Cross Blue Shield found that from 2010 to 2016, the number of people diagnosed with an addiction to opioids climbed 493%. Yet, at the same time, there was only a 65% increase in the number of people getting medication-assisted treatment to manage their addiction (Kounang).

Why do we allow the drug abuse problem to skyrocket well beyond treatment resources? Perhaps it is because drug treatment centers come at a cost. They can range from \$20,000-\$60,000 for a 30-90 day inpatient stay. No wonder 77.7% of addicts cannot afford it (Common). But for society, the costs go well beyond treatment.

The opioid crisis in America is increasing by the day and with it comes increased deaths and suffering. Some suggest creating injection sites to supervise heroin users to help with the growing death toll. But this is a short term fix. Rehab is a long-term fix and gives Opioid abusers a chance to reclaim normal lives.

Making rehabilitation centers more accessible to financially strapped addicts will help the opioid epidemic. Reducing or eliminating the financial blockades to treatment that exist for nearly 80 percent of addicts will answer the prayers of an increasing number of victims of this plague. Affordable rehabilitation centers will eliminate the need for miracles.

Ella Whitman (Champlain Valley Union High School Junior)

When my high school principal told us that there were only three rules we had to follow I was shocked. How can you sum up every expectation that must be demanded of a young adult into three things? He went on to inform us that we must take care of ourselves, take care of each other, and the place. Thinking about these three guidelines it became apparent that achieving them can be challenging at times but the step to do it is simple; you must respect all things. Looking at our nation today it is clear that the thing that lack of respect creates the most conflict in our nation. Our negligence to respect each other's bodies, opinions, ethnicity, races, backgrounds and beliefs leads us to discrimination, hatred and prejudice. We see endless examples in our lives today.

The lack of respect for one another's opinion is vividly apparent in politics today. The Pew Research Center recently reported how the partisan divide on our nation's politics is increasing. A study concluded "The shares of Republicans and Democrats who express very unfavorable opinions of the opposing party have increased dramatically since the 1990s, but have changed little in recent years." This is alarming because if we as people cannot see others perspective, we will not be able to collaborate or work with one another to collectively strengthen our nation. By respecting others' opinion we can gain insight and also learn their specific needs.

Not only is respect lacking towards each other's opinions, but to others well-being as we have recently seen millions of women come forward with stories of sexual abuse. Not only in our nation's history but in present day, women are treated as objects. Just within the last twenty four hours, additional notable people have come forward with their previous stories of harassment such as Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Lawrence and Molly Ringwald, not to mention the 12 million others who have also shared their stories on Facebook.

Looking back, maybe our principal had a point. To function not only as a school, but as a community or even a nation we must have respect. To advance our nation from its biggest struggles and alleviate the consequences that come with it each person must learn how to see out of another's eyes. Each person must treat each other with dignity. Respect is important to our country because it allows us to adjoin together with one another. Our nation was created upon respect and embracing one another for their differences. Each person difference brings allows us to be the unique nation we are today. We must embrace and respect, every opinion each one of us has, every talent each one of us possesses and every person each one of is.

Name Withheld Upon Request (Burlington School District Senior)

Dear Senator Sanders,

The biggest issue we face in America today is that we neglect our incarcerated population. I'm part of the juvenile incarcerated population, and as a resident I don't feel like I'm getting the appropriate treatment I need. I was already here once and the skills I learned were not enough to keep me from coming back.

Incarcerated people need to be given the opportunity and resources to identify what gets them in trouble and to work on their problems. If a person has a history of violent behaviors and is incarcerated because of his behaviors, he shouldn't be doing groups on drugs and alcohol. Instead he should be focusing his time and attention on working to better his violent behaviors so he can be successful when he gets out.

Another issue is that there are many young people in the system who do not need to be. There are almost 7,000 youth behind bars for "technical violations" of their probation. Also, about 600 youth are behind bars for "status offense," which are behaviors that are not law violations for adults, such as running away, truancy, and incorrigibility. (Wager and Rabuy)

There are another 840,000 people on parole and about 3.7 million people on probation. (Wager and Rabuy) I would like to see better support for these people who come out of jail. If previously incarcerated people relapse for certain types of offenses like drug and alcohol offenses, breaking curfew, or violating probation, they should be given opportunities to fix that before it becomes a pattern, rather than being thrown back in jail.

I also think they should have more adult programs like juveniles have such as short or long- term programs away from their environment. A placement that juveniles go to after being released from a locked facility is called a step down. Laraway is an example of this, where a juvenile can go and be allowed back in the community. They are given the opportunity and supports to help them find a job and enroll back in school.

I hope that policymakers and the public carefully consider better treatment within locked facilities and alternatives to incarceration for people who are not a threat to public safety. We should ask whether legitimate social goals are served by maintaining the status quo.