

**Testimony of Meghan Metzler, Champlain Valley School District Chair
March 14, 2024**

House Committee of Education
House Committee on Ways and Means

Hello,

I am Meghan Metzler, the recently appointed Chair of the Champlain Valley School District school board. I would like to thank all of you for the time today to share our recent experience. CVSD educates 3,800 students from five towns - Williston, Shelburne, St. George, Charlotte and Hinesburg. We operate 6 schools in those five towns. The schools range from 328 students at Allen Brook School - which educates Pre-K through second graders through CVU High School, where we have over 1,300 students. Our smallest K-8 is Charlotte Central School, where we educate over 350 students. Champlain Valley School District lost 17% of our tax capacity under Act 127 which is not fully offset by the \$.17 discount we received for this year under H.850 and will diminish over time.

I am coming to you today, along with several other school board colleagues, as the chair of a board with a recently failed school budget. This is the first time a school budget has failed since we consolidated. It failed by a margin of approximately 39% to 61%.

Implications

So what does this mean? The original budget that we proposed and moved forward with was one that provided level services for our students and reduced headcount in line with expected enrollment. That meant we included certain positions that were previously funded by ESSER, but not all, and we had about \$1.5M in maintenance projects for the six schools in our district. For a level service - *not level funded*- budget, the proposed tax rates for certain of our towns were as high as 30%.

To be clear, a 10% increase in year over year spending for our district yielded a tax increase as high as 30% for our towns. The board was put in the position of having to explain this very complicated and opaque process to our voters and why for exactly the same service as well as some facilities needs, the cost to you as a taxpayer is going up 30%.

We have had many people in our community tell us either directly or indirectly that our community wants to support our schools, but they can't at this type of increase. And our community DOES want to support our schools - every other article on our ballot, including a

\$3.5M bond, passed on Town Meeting Day. We heard loud and clear that a “no” vote was to reflect that either they could not afford these increases or they wanted to send a message to Montpelier. I understand the affordability concerns. I understand wanting to send a message.

The message was sent to the legislature through our students, staff, and the systems we count on to ensure stability for the upcoming school year. The budget failure is impeding the district's processes of posting, recruiting, and hiring quality faculty and staff. It is delaying the building of teaching assignments and schedules at the school level.

Our board met on Tuesday night to discuss and re-warn the budget. As a result, we are cutting approximately \$4M from our budget. That means the maintenance projects we were trying to complete - things like HVAC repairs- that affect both learning and safety- are going to be deferred and ultimately increase our cost over time. It also means that all of the previously ESSER funded positions have been reduced or offset. These ESSER positions reflected the things you have heard schools need- social emotional and academic support. The budget that was approved reflects a reduction of over 42 FTE throughout our district vs FY24. On Tuesday, our staff received a notice that we will have to go through a reduction in force.

The 42 FTE, or almost 5% of our FTEs, reflects cuts across all of our schools and all facets of programming - athletics, academics, instructional support, central office, operations, and maintenance. Behind every single one is a person that we care deeply about, many of whom live in our community.

In addition to the \$4M we are cutting, we are also going to apply \$1M of fund balance to ultimately bring down the ask on the education fund by \$5M. We are now asking our voters to support a budget that provides fewer services, has an approximately 5.8% increase in cost year over year and will yield an average tax increase of around 13% by our estimation.

Act 127 and the path forward

As a board, we had the adoption of Act 127 on our radar before it was even passed into law. It was a board goal for two years. We developed a strategy and an approach that was designed around a 5% cap and knowing that a fiscal cliff was coming. Representative Brady was on our board at the time the law was passed. We knew what was being asked of us.

I don't know how to adequately convey the experience of the past eight weeks when we learned about H850 after we had warned our budget. In many ways, our administrators, and the board, have been put in the position of trying to complete five years of strategic planning in a matter of weeks. We are trying to explain this to our community. We are trying to make the very best decisions we can. We are trying to guess what the yield might be so we can give accurate information to our voters. We are trying to reassure the very talented, dedicated educators and support staff that the work that they are doing is valued and appreciated at the same time as having to send out reduction in force notifications.

We need help from the people in this room and the broader legislature. Our district consolidated under Act 46 and we have done everything we can to operate at a scale that supports the needs of our students and the community. In a letter to my local legislators, I noted that Act 127 was well intended, but it was not designed to raise all ships, and it has not. In many ways it is dismantling equitable practices across the state. At the local level, we are trying to lead our community, but we need clear action from you. As of Monday, nearly 40% of weighted pupils in the state of Vermont had a failed budget, that's a different way to look at the 30 budgets that failed. The 62 passed budgets reflect roughly the same number of weighted students as the 30 that failed. This is a systemic problem that requires a systemic solution, and there is only so much we can do at the local board level.

I would like to thank you for your service, I know that these are big problems that require tough solutions. I know that we have to do things that are unpopular, we are doing those same things and feeling the same pressure at the local level. Thank you for your time.