

ORLEANS CENTRAL SUPERVISORY UNION

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TO: Vermont House Ed Committee
FROM: Penny Chamberlin, Superintendent of Schools
DATE: February 8, 2024
RE: Construction Aid Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you. Listed below are the points I hope to convey to you during my testimony.

- ENROLLMENT:
 - Current enrollments are stable and show a slight increase in student enrollment PreK-12 over the past three years.
 - Based on a NESDEC study two years ago, we are maintaining our enrollments with a slight increase which is projected to hold for the next 8-10 years.
 - Unlike many districts in Vermont, our enrollments are not decreasing, we are very stable which causes another challenge, we have plenty of students, buildings in disrepair (mold, asbestos, PCBs/currently unknown) and a shortage of staff to cover the robust enrollment.

- CONSTRUCTION:
 - Short term and long-term construction need for our buildings are based on the fact we have two buildings that are 100 years old and 4 buildings that are between 30-50 years old and a High School built in the mid 1960's.
 - Prior to the State's building assessment initiative, we worked with our boards to secure a thorough, comprehensive, and up to date assessment of our buildings to support a short-term and long-term Facility Improvement Plan.
 - We contracted with Truexcullins and our final report will be available by the end of March. We were able to use ESSER funds to support this cost vs. asking for local funds.
 - We have schools that have been impacted by the July flood event (two of these schools are in the process of qualifying for FEMA support; however, there will still be a matched or percentage of that total cost that will be out of pocket for the Elem/Middle School District through local Capital Funds.) With the recent rain in December and the potential for a thaw and more weather this spring, we are in a precarious situation with two of our schools.
 - The physical repairs and infrastructure need in our buildings has been outrunning our ability to fund them through local taxpayer contributions over the past several years.

- **SCHOOL BUDGETS:**
 - Our school districts are experiencing over a 20% increase in our FY25 budgets as of today. This increase doesn't directly impact our local tax rates at 20% but it does impact them enough so that when the CLA is factored in, our tax rates are up over 30%. Our budgets are very lean. Over 70% of our budgets support benefits and salaries for our faculty and staff. While we are trying to keep the cost of operating our rural, town schools to a minimum, we are losing this battle. Our taxpayers are very devoted to their rural schools. We love our small schools and what they offer to the culture of our communities. However, we are seeing the long-term challenges with maintaining our small schools.

- **STAFFING SHORTAGES:**
 - We currently have six K-8 schools. To staff these schools, we needed a minimum of 54 core content area teachers. We dropped to 50 teachers last year and are at 47 today. We have 20 out of our 47 core teachers on emergency and provisional licenses. We have an additional 18 teachers serving allied arts, music, PE, and special education who are also on an emergency or provisional license.
 - We have over 12 classrooms that have had to be combined into two grades levels to open this this past August. We have one building in the last two weeks where we had two teachers resign and two on FMLA leave which caused this building to combine even more grade levels and secure another provisionally licensed staff member and two long term substitutes.
 - We have 1 or less substitutes available in each of our K-8 schools. This shortage of staff and substitutes has caused us to close grade levels in our schools on a daily basis across 6 schools due to the lack of coverage and the ability to safely supervise students.
 - Last year our Supervisory Union and District School Boards negotiated a substantial salary and benefit package increase for our teaching professionals as well as our support staff. The focus was on improving our compensation to not only recruit additional staff but to retain those who are currently with us.
 - We are in year two of a severe staffing shortage, we do not believe this will resolve itself for a few years to come.

In summary, with the above challenges, our SU is struggling with what may come from the state with future potential mergers, long term impacts of Act 127, etc.

I applaud our resilient staff and administration each and every day for showing up and providing the best possible education for all students

