



120 State Street, Montpelier VT 05620-2501  
(p) 802-828-3135 | (f) 802-828-3140

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Representative Donovan and Representative Peltz  
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary, Agency of Education  
SUBJECT: Request for Comparison of Governance Models  
DATE: February 4, 2014

---

We have discussed your request, and in the time allowed, have done our best to provide guidance on options.

We offer below some commentary on several models that have come before the committee. In this document, we will briefly contrast three models of governance, as a way of illuminating some of the costs and benefits of different approaches. We hope this exercise will help you weigh the Legislature's options.

We offer this exercise with a handful of caveats. The tight turnaround requested necessarily limits the complexity of our analysis. The models we discuss are selected for illustrative purposes from the models we have heard discussed in the past year. In addition, this document and the models we discuss have not been tested and discussed with relevant stakeholders or by an attorney, so may have limitations beyond those we present.

Key challenges we hear driving the discussion and hope to address through a solution:

**1. Challenges related to improving learning:**

- Challenge of promoting continuous improvement in learning
- Challenge of assessing effectiveness of programs with respect to improving learning

**2. Leadership instability:**

- At least 15 Superintendent openings this year and few viable candidates,
- About 30% turnover of principals every year

Rapid turnover is related to the difficulty of developing and maintaining a coherent agenda and answering to and supporting its implementation across a large numbers of boards.

### **3. Challenges addressing mandates:**

- Federal mandates add administrative and reporting requirements: The impact is greatest on states with lots of small administrative units. The obligations fall on districts and schools (and on the AOE to keep separate schools/units straight with ever fewer staff).
- In VT we have lots of units and many units have very few students over which they can spread the cost of complying with mandates.
- The decline in enrollment compounds the effect.

**4. Challenges of analysis (cost effectiveness):** The complexity of the current situation makes it extremely difficult to analyze effectiveness in any meaningful way. Given our high levels of expenditures, this contributes to a crisis of confidence in the system. More critically, it reduces our ability to identify strategies that work and make them widely available. It also makes it more difficult to identify cases where schools are relying on ineffective practices.

### **5. Challenges of Analysis (impact on learning):**

Research supports systematic, continuous approaches to improving learning. It is impossible to build PK-12 coherence across multiple governing units. The result is a limitation in the educational experience of many of our students that can be corrected.

**6. Challenges of effectiveness (SPED):** We see some anecdotal evidence that current governance structure may make it difficult to achieve regional solutions to certain challenges related to the provision of special education services. These challenges include, among other items:

- heavy reliance on 1-1 aides and teachers
- limited access to the full range of increasingly specialized expertise of special educators, especially in small districts.

(Note: Act 153 and subsequent legislation are creating progress that is at least partially addressing this situation. Complexities of the governance structure are slowing progress and in some cases may make the transition impossible.)

### **Models discussed:**

All models are based on the assumption that an integrated budget will be passed in a K-12 unit with a commingled vote of all participants. Allocation of resources among schools will be made by that unit. Each school will have an organization that has a role in determining how resources are spent within the school; helps to define the school's culture; and communicates problems and opportunities to the central board. The extent of the school board's role will need to be determined.



Note: It will be difficult to make these models work without including the historical academies with public high schools. This effort will present challenges, but is certainly possible. The incorporation of nominally private schools will present challenges, some unique to each school, in each model.

### **Model 1: SUs**

Existing number of SUs, all PK-12 systems with one board, one statewide Career Technical Education (CTE) district.

(Note: The statewide CTE can fit in any of the models discussed below.)

Description: Each supervisory union becomes a supervisory district. Supervisory districts will be responsible for students K–12.

### **Benefits**

- A tightly coordinated and integrated curriculum across schools and levels of instruction.
- Elimination of the substantial inequities among districts. Spending levels now sometimes vary considerably among districts in the same SU.
- A huge improvement in the ability to compare spending and the effectiveness of spending across the new, larger K-12 districts.
- The structure will reduce (no one has found a way to eliminate) difficulties measuring student performance relative to curriculum design and, most challenging of all, teacher performance.
- Greater transparency, especially within budgets, and an improved understanding of the process by voters.
- The smaller number of units reporting will result in savings through a reduction in reporting and increase the time superintendents are able to spend on education and management.
- Some supervisory unions have a number of districts large enough that the amount of time superintendents spend working with boards detracts from other obligations.
- The more streamlined structure may reduce turnover among superintendents, principals, and business officials.

### **Costs**

- A loss of local control, particularly in the area of establishing a budget.
- It is worth noting that the proposal is less a reduction in local control than an expansion in the size of communities exercising control. Given the extent that supervisory unions



have been directed to expand their responsibilities, it is likely that a larger portion of total spending will be presented to voters for their approval.

- Accepting the current boundaries of supervisory unions would build in the large differences in size that exist among supervisory unions.
- Some VT supervisory unions contain so few students that they are smaller than the number of students often used to define A SINGLE SMALL SCHOOL in academic studies.
- It will be possible to combine a few small supervisory unions within this model.

### **Model 2: SDs**

Reduced number of PK-12 districts.

Description: An optimal number of larger school districts would be established. These districts would be constructed to be balanced in size and to offer a range of diversity within

### **Benefits**

- Public school choice: The larger size of districts and transportation limits on choice make it likely that full choice could be offered to all secondary students. With historical academies continuing their role and the relatively small number of students attending nominally private schools, it is worth exploring the possibility that choice could be offered to the nominally private schools as well.
- Fewer units, so higher quality leadership
- Consolidation will make the units more comparable further improving analyses of educational effectiveness and cost effectiveness
- Coherence PK-12 in education programming and improvement initiatives
- Generally the benefits applicable to model 1 apply here.

### **Costs**

- Local board's role becomes more advisory.
- The size of these boards will create considerably more distance between the boards and residents. There are a number of supervisory districts that are as large as these units are likely to be. We have contacted school officials, board member, and volunteers in Burlington and South Burlington. It appears clear that solid, productive communities of students and parents grow up around the individual schools in large supervisory districts.
- The size may be sufficiently great to require another level of supervision. Even with a single school board, the number of front office staff, principals and others a superintendent can supervise effectively is finite. An assistant or vice superintendent and some additional front office staff may be necessary. The total number of additional people would likely be less than the staff of the consolidated SUs.



- This potential cost has an advantage of its own. We have a shortage of qualified superintendents. An expansion of the number of assistant superintendents would give educators the opportunity to enter the field with supervision and mentoring on the spot. Many of these people will go on to be superintendents. Others may determine the position is not a good fit and go back to the classroom or other area of administration. There have been cases where new superintendents have, in spite of the best intentions, done serious damage to supervisory unions and their districts while learning that their interests and talents were elsewhere.

### **Model 3: Three or 4 regional education districts (REDS)**

Description: The state would create 3 or 4 REDs by statute. There are three proposed REDS that were voted down by one or two districts where a majority of all voters and the voters in a majority of districts approved the RED. The studies associated with these proposals anticipated substantial educational and financial benefits.

#### Benefits:

- The REDs should have benefits similar to the benefits applying to the newly created individual districts in Model 1. Because of the limited number, the broader benefits of inter-district comparability would be lost.
- Assuming the REDs achieve the expected educational improvements and financial efficiencies, they should increase interest in REDs elsewhere.

#### Costs

- There is real potential for backlash if a decision affecting only a small number of SUs is made from Montpelier. This backlash is likely to include some supporters of the original RED proposal.
- Even the possibility of the state requiring consolidation has caused district to close schools and consider closing schools while assisting in the opening of independent schools. It is likely that the proposed action will accelerate this trend.

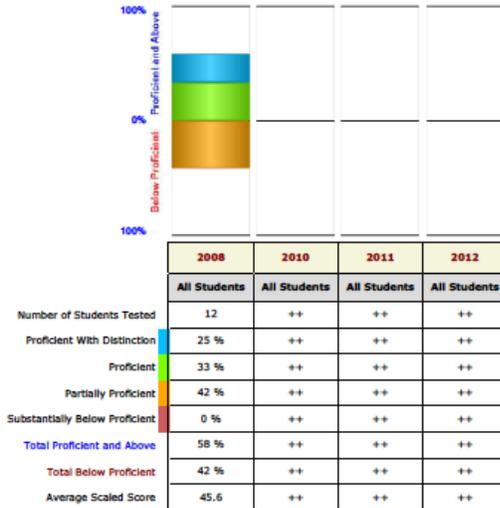


# Appendix 1: Sample Score Reports



## NECAP Assessment Report

Organization:	Coventry Village School
Teaching Year:	2011-2012
Test/Subject:	NECAP Writing Grade 5
Breakdown:	Across all the grades tested, how did our students do?
Comparison:	Over Time?



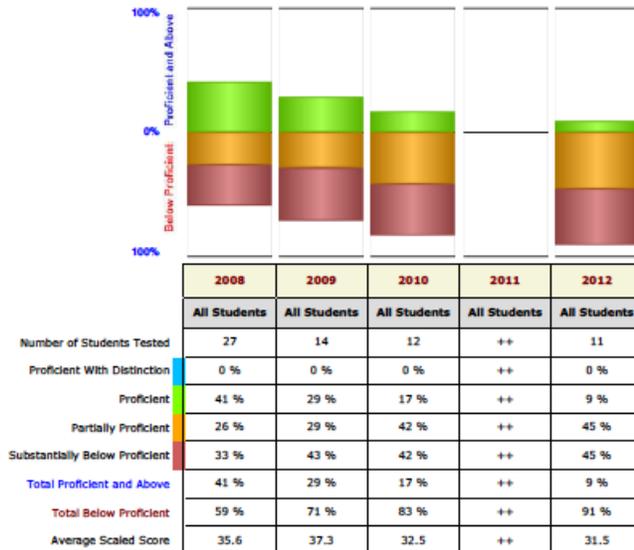
The NECAP Math, Reading, and Writing tests are administered in October and measure student achievement of Grade Expectations for previous school years. NECAP Science tests are administered in May and measure student achievement of Grade Expectations in current and previous school years. District assessment data are for the accountability LEA which is either the town or union school district.

2/3/2014 11:18:47 PM

Web comments, suggestions, or errors for correction: [DOE-Webmanager@state.vt.us](mailto:DOE-Webmanager@state.vt.us)

Page 1 of 1

Teaching Year:	2011-2012
Test/Subject:	NECAP Math Grade 11
Breakdown:	Across all the grades tested, how did our students do?
Comparison:	Over Time?



The NECAP Math, Reading, and Writing tests are administered in October and measure student achievement of Grade Expectations for previous school years. NECAP Science tests are administered in May and measure student achievement of Grade Expectations in current and previous school years. District assessment data are for the accountability LEA which is either the town or union school district.

2/3/2014 11:20:16 PM

Web comments, suggestions, or errors for correction: [DOE-Webmanager@state.vt.us](mailto:DOE-Webmanager@state.vt.us)

Page 1 of 1

