Dear members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Lachlan Francis and I am a first year student at the University of Vermont. Prior to matriculating at UVM I was a student at Brattleboro Union High School. In high school I served as Student Representative to the Vermont State Board of Education and was elected Vice-Chair of the State Board--the first student to be elected to an officer's position. I am also currently a member of Governor Shumlin's Advisory Council on Pathways from Poverty--a cause that I believe is deeply intertwined with the need for strong public education. I am incredibly fortunate to have been afforded the opportunities that I have been throughout my time in Vermont's public education system, but I am also painfully aware that our system has its shortcomings.

As you are all aware, the way in which we fund education is unsustainable. As of FY 2013, we spend more per pupil, $16,773, than any other state in the country. Our spending rate is about $1,400 more than the New England average, and is $5,000 above the national average. Furthermore, we know that these costs will continue to increase overtime, placing an overwhelming burden on the property tax. The overwhelming driver of these costs, when combined with declining student enrollments, is the staffing levels in our schools, as 80% of all school expenditures are directed to salary and benefits. While we have seen a 21% decline in student enrollment since 1997, the number of teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators in our system has stayed the same. My experiences as a member of the State Board of Education have lead me to believe that this is a result of Vermont's complex and opaque education governance model. With more than 250 school districts, 60 supervisory unions and as many as 13 education governance models, it is nearly impossible for our education system to adequately address the many pressing issues that arise. It is also worth noting that these issues are not limited to appropriately matching school staffing levels with student enrollments--with so many systems in place it is also challenging to ensure that all schools are upholding the Education Quality Standards, particularly with respect to special education requirements.

While it's important to realize that staffing levels are leading the increases in per pupil costs, it also important to note that Vermont's educators are undercompensated with regard to regional and national levels alike. The average Vermont teacher earns a salary of $52,526. This is $8,000 below the average for New England and $4,000 lower than the national average. Clearly, this presents a problem when it comes to recruiting and retaining the best educators here in Vermont, which should be a priority for the state's education system.

The financial dilemma facing our education system is serious, and I applaud this committee for taking on the issue. I am more than aware that it is a polarizing issue and one that involves a

great amount of political risk for many members of this body. However I would implore this committee, and this body as a whole, to look at more than just education finances when considering educational reforms. We must examine if we are spending the money on the right segments of the education system, and we must also acknowledge that our educational outcomes are not as good as we think they are.

While we spend an astonishing amount of money on K-12 education, we are woefully lacking in funding for both early childhood education and for post-secondary education. We know that early childhood education is essential to ameliorating the issues faced by impoverished Vermonters, yet last year's universal pre-k bill provides only 10 hours a week of service--not nearly enough to resolve the fact that between 40 and 50 percent of Vermont's children are unprepared for kindergarten. We must redouble on our commitment to the youngest Vermonters if we are to see a system that produces equitable outcomes.

We must also look at the other end of the spectrum--higher education. Today, only 52% of Vermont high school students will enroll in a two or four year degree program. Given the correlation between education levels, economic growth and income levels, this should be of large concern to the State. In no state is it more expensive as a share of median income to earn a 2 or 4 year degree than in Vermont. Briefly going back to staffing levels, it has been frequently thrown around that adjusting the staff to student ratio from 4.67:1, where it currently stands, to 5:1, would save $74 million. Well, moving the ratio to 6:1 would save enough money to send every Vermont high school graduate to college for free.

Vermont's high school graduation rate, 86.6%, is one of the highest rates in the nation. However this is only average for member states of the New England Secondary School Consortium. Additionally, over the last 5 years, Vermont's graduation rate has increased by only 1.1%, whereas the other NESSC states have seen an average increase of 6% over the last 5 years.

What is most troubling, is the chasm between success rates for students from advantaged backgrounds and those who are disadvantaged. The high school graduation rate for students who qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch is 75%. For non-FRL students, the graduation rate is 95%. 63% of English language learners will graduate high school, compared with 87% of non-English language learners. Lastly, 68% of students with disabilities will graduate from high school, compared with 90% of those without a disability.

If you look at high school dropout rates, the impact of these statistics is even more troubling. 1 in 5 economically disadvantaged Vermont students will drop out of high school. 1 in 6 English

language learners will drop out of high school, as will 1 in 5 students with a disability. Looking at the system as a whole, Vermont has the highest high school dropout rate, just under 10%, of any of the NESSC states.

For those students who do graduate high school, there remains a disparity in trajectory as high school graduates move into the real world. Of the high school graduates in Vermont who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, only 1 in 3 socioeconomically will enroll in college. This is 11% lower than the NESSC average. Fewer than 1 in 5 graduates with a disability will enroll at an institution of higher education. This rate is also much lower than the NESSC average.

Given these underwhelming outcomes, it is particularly necessary that we study the composition of the system that has produced them. In addition to limiting the ability of districts to respond to fluctuations in student enrollment vis a vis staffing levels, our model prevents schools from providing adequate educational opportunity to many of our students.

In Vermont, 41% of our students are in districts with fewer than 500 pupils. Throughout the rest of New England, only 4% of students are in such districts. 55% of our students are in districts with between 500 and 3000 pupils. This compares to 8% of students in the rest of New England. And finally, 4% of Vermont students are in districts with between 3000 and 5000 students, whereas 23% of New England students are in such districts.

The size and scale of our districts has a direct impact on both spending levels and educational opportunities for kids. Lower staff to student ratios, a sign that there are too many staffers for a school's student enrollment, are more likely to occur in the small districts hit hardest by declines in student enrollment. Smaller districts also spread out costs over a smaller base of students, meaning that unplanned per pupil spending, whether it be from a loss of students, new special education requirements (from unplanned incoming students) or emergency renovation have a bigger impact on per pupil expenditure.

Smaller districts also have a harder time providing ample opportunity to students, particularly at the secondary level. This is true both academically and when it comes to extracurriculars. Many small high schools do not offer courses such as calculus, physics or chemistry. This is particularly noteworthy because many colleges will not accept applications to certain programs without these courses as prerequisites. Schools this size often have only one teacher per subject, making it difficult to cater to as many learning styles as possible. It is also hard to imagine a broad array of extracurricular opportunities being available to students at high schools with graduating classes in the teens.

On the subject of district consolidation, the research literature says that there can indeed be benefits to such actions. The State of New York took action to consolidate districts in the 1980's and 90's, and a review of their efforts concluded that school district consolidation substantially lowers operating costs, particularly when small districts are combined. The work of Duncombe and Yinger, authors of this report, said that "consolidation is likely to lower the costs of two 300-pupil districts by over 20 percent, to lower the costs of two 900-pupil districts by 7 to 9 percent, and to have little, if any, impact on the costs of two 1,500-pupil districts."

The research literature also suggests that there is a "right-size" for secondary schools. While high schools with fewer than 300 students outperform those with greater than 2100, schools of any size in between are more successful in advancing student achievement than those smaller than 300.

Considering the geographical challenges that we face, it is impractical to suggest that we move to county wide systems with large, central high schools. Such a system would also run counter to what we believe in as Vermonters--local control. However there must be a way to balance the two needs; larger school districts more adept at controlling costs and providing equity of opportunity, and a system of local control that provides all Vermonters a seat at the table.

I believe that the bill your committee has put forth, looking at school district expansion, is an appropriate way to address these issues. This body faces daunting financial realities that I am sympathetic to, however I implore you to give thought to how any legislation you enact will support opportunities for kids.

Before I leave you today, I just want to share with you the background that has inspired me to become so involved in the arena of education policy. For elementary and middle school I attended the Putney Central School, a PreK-8 school with about 160 kids. Our school community was deeply affected by poverty, with nearly 60% of all students on free and reduced lunch. When we graduated from middle school, I was chosen to speak at our graduation. I stood at the podium, knees shaking and hands clammy, and reflected upon the many experiences and memories shared with my 16 classmates. We had formed a lifelong bond and, thanks to the incredible work of what I truly believe to be the hardest working and most professional teaching and support staff in the state, had accomplished a great deal. Yet of the 17 of us, only 11 of us would walk at our high school graduation four years later. Three have already become parents and at least two have already entered the criminal justice system. Only a handful of us are pursuing post-secondary higher education of any kind.

What my story at Putney Central, and it is one that is not at all uncommon, especially in the more rural and impoverished corners of the state, tells me, is that what's at stake is real. What's at stake is the American dream, right here in our corner of the country. If we are to have the audacity to believe that the zip code in which you are born should not predict your educational opportunities, than we must act. If we are to have the audacity to believe that one's socioeconomic status should not predict their trajectory, than we must act. If we are to have the audacity to believe that students of all backgrounds should be able to find success, than we must act. As Vermonters we must assume some level responsibility for all our children, and we must advance their cause, as along with it comes the American dream and the Vermont way.