

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to respond to the rebuttal that was recently sent out by the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE). We appreciate the rebuttal, as we believe it adds to Vermont's understanding and discussion of educational reform initiatives. Our goal in writing this brief was to contribute to the debate, as well as support communities and legislators as they evaluate the cost-benefits of consolidation. We use rural education research to provide additional insights to these many complex issues.

The AOE rebuttal highlights the complexities of the debate on both district and school consolidation. Some of the points raised in the rebuttal were valid and helpful for researchers like us engaging in work on consolidation. The AOE argues district consolidation has been found to have financial benefits due to economies of scale. Our stance however is that empirical evidence for the economic benefits of consolidation are inconsistent. Through our policy brief, we highlight some of the potential pitfalls of consolidation, including unanticipated costs.

The AOE also notes that some of the school and district size classifications found in the research differ from Vermont's definitions. Although this is an important distinction, the concept of different outcomes based on school size are still important issues relevant for Vermont's educational system. To clarify this point regarding research and school size, we spoke with Dr. Craig Howley at Ohio University. Howley wrote in a personal correspondence:

“The overall findings about size break down when one looks at students, schools, and districts of different poverty levels (higher and lower, or on a continuum from highest to lowest rates of poverty). Achievement levels in the most affluent communities are positively related to school size. But achievement levels in poorer communities are negatively related to size. Bigger is better for the rich; smaller is better for the poor. Studies have examined this relationship, for instance, in Alaska, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Maine, Montana, Ohio, Texas...

This finding is *in general*, and not *in every case*, and it's not *precisely the same* everywhere. Maybe it seems confusing. But here's the practical rule-of-thumb: if a state has smaller schools serving mixed-income communities, it should probably keep them. The related reasons are (1) closing these school predictably harms kids' achievement levels; (2) closing small schools in the 21st century is very surely not a cost-efficiency measure (the cost benefit ratio is not promising); and (3) smaller communities are centered on and need their smaller schools—economic damage is done by the closures (this result contributes to the poor cost-benefit-ratio).”

As can be seen from this statement, size is a complicated issue. This does not mean research on size is not valid because it does not use the same criteria as Vermont. Rather, it reveals the importance of evaluating the impact of school size on student learning,

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particularly given Vermont's interest in reducing the achievement gap between high- and low-income students.

Finally, we appreciate the rebuttal's concurrence with our findings that rural schools play critical roles in supporting their communities. However, the statement that "the brief tasks schools with supporting and driving community and economic development, improving the tax base, and bringing new business investment to towns... We ask that we not put the responsibility of saving our rural towns purely on the shoulders of our schools and students," misrepresents our proposal recommendations. We will be addressing this element of our proposal in detail tomorrow at our briefing with the House Committee on Education to clarify our stance.

While we respectfully disagree with many of the critiques offered by the Agency of Education, we appreciate how this response has expanded the conversation about Vermont's rural schools and communities, and the need to use research to inform decision making. We feel that this type of dialogue is extremely important in understanding the needs of Vermont, and developing informed policy statewide.

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