

## Act 173 Testimony talking points

The Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU) has been planning for the implementation of Act 173 for the past two years. SVSU and the Bennington Region have some of the highest poverty levels in the State and children with tremendous need, so the work to transition toward implementation of Act 173 has been our focus since 2019 with a priority on professional learning and realignment of our budgeting process linked to our multi-tiered systems of support.

To provide a bit more context, the SVSU serves the towns of Arlington, Bennington, (Village of) North Bennington, Pownal, Sandgate, Shaftsbury, and Woodford. The member districts include:

- Arlington School District,
- Mt. Anthony Union High School District #14,
- North Bennington Graded School District, Inc.,
- Sandgate School District, and
- Southwest Vermont Union Elementary School District (SVUESD)

The Southwest Vermont Union Elementary School District, SVUESD, began operation July 1st of 2019, after the State Board of Education issued its report on Act 46. At the same time we implemented the Vermont selected SSDMS (Shared School District Data Management System), eFinancePLUS. This past July 1st (2021), the Arlington and Sandgate School Districts joined the SVSU, also migrated to eFinancePLUS, and added over 400 learners to the SVSU population, with nearly a quarter having IEPs.

Each fall we begin planning for subsequent fiscal year budgets, and rely on data provided by the Agency of Education (AOE) and other State of Vermont Departments. This fall we received the Census Block Grant Estimator tool from the AOE, which is based on current law, to generate revenue figures for special education funding. All budgets have been built on current law of Act 173 going into effect July 1st, 2022.

Given that Town Meeting is the earliest it can possibly be this year, all budgets will be properly warned and posted before the end of this month (between January 20th and January 30th). As such, we have held numerous budget meetings with school district boards over the past several weeks to meet the approaching deadline. Tomorrow evening will most likely be the final meeting and all boards will have voted and approved their budgets and warnings prepared. If the Legislature were to delay implementation of the Census Block Grant Model, our school districts would not have ample time (nor the pertinent funding information) to revise, approve, and properly warn their FY23 budgets. While it is unknown what the exact financial impact of a delay would be, based on current year data we would anticipate over a one million shortfall in revenue.

In addition to the challenges we would face with a shortage in funding, we also must consider the needs of our community. We have seen a 100% increase in children and families experiencing homelessness in the first three months of the year, compared to all of last year's numbers. As of December 2021, our largest elementary schools have 29.07 and 29.57% of the student population identified as having a disability. Nearly 30% of our population is eligible for IEP services, requiring supplemental instruction to close learning gaps and achieve grade level standards. Removing supports and services from the district with the greatest needs will create an equity issue within our state.

Educators and Administrators have just weathered a pandemic with insurmountable challenges, constantly changing guidance, staffing shortages and increased student social emotional needs, and we have managed to provide in person learning for our children this year despite these challenges. Adding additional administrative work to revise all of our budgets and meet again with all of our boards to adopt new budgets for our new merged district of ten schools and two

separate non-operating school districts, would be both impossible and would also pose an undue burden on our system at this moment in time.

In sum, the districts have put in countless hours of budgetary planning, procedural changes, and professional learning to bolster our Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) system to meet the needs of our learners. The guidance on implementing Act 173 was released in August of 2019, and has been our focus since the start of the 19-20 school year, to meet the needs of all of our learners.

Districts have already begun implementing the changes outlined in the 2017 District Management Group (DMG) Report and the 2019 AOE 173 Technical Assistance Guidance Document, in order to provide instruction that meets the needs of most learners in the classroom, and providing supplemental intervention by expert teachers. We have developed a budget to meet the needs of all of our learners. We have already begun implementing our MTSS system changes, and we cannot return to our prior practices at this late date. And we need the resources to do so. Removing over a million dollars in funding toward the budget of the schools with one of the highest poverty rates in the state will not help us meet the goals we have set for our educational system, and will leave our learners without the interventions they require. We are working to close the achievement gap for our marginalized populations. Please help us achieve this goal by not reversing course on 173 at this late date.