

Vermont Superintendents Association

Testimony to the House Education Committee

Wednesday, January 13, 2021

Introduction of the Vermont Superintendents Association

and

Responding to the prompts provided by Chair Webb regarding COVID-19:

How are things going?

What are the challenges?

What are the opportunities?

What are the lessons learned?

Presented by:

David Younce, Superintendent, Mill River Unified Union School District; President

Jeanne Collins, Superintendent, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union;

Past-President

Emilie Knisley, Superintendent, Orange East Supervisory Union

Peter Burrows, Superintendent, Addison Central School District

Julie Regimbal, Superintendent, Missisquoi Valley School District

David Younce, Superintendent for the Mill River Unified Union School District, VSA

President

I'd like to start by expressing thanks on behalf of all of my colleagues for inviting us to share our perspective and experiences with you today. My name is Dave Younce. I serve as the superintendent of the Mill River Unified Union School District in Rutland County and also am honored to represent my colleagues as the president of the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA). The VSA is an organization that represents and supports more than 50 Vermont superintendents and advocates for sound educational policy decisions in order to best serve and meet the needs of students and educators. VSA is very well served by the leadership of Executive Director Jeff Francis and Associate Executive Director Chelsea Myers, who are with us in this meeting today.

VSA is organized into five regional groups: Southeast VT, Southwest VT, Winooski Valley, Northeast Kingdom, and Champlain Valley. These groups meet regularly (during COVID-19 sometime multiple times per week) to identify regional and statewide needs and provide collegial support. It won't surprise you that during the last 10 months that support has been more important than ever before.

As you are aware, Vermont Superintendents serve as the statutory CEOs of complex organizations in a state that cherishes local control and decision-making while faced with the

need to address challenges (both educational and fiscal) on a statewide level. Under normal circumstances the role of the superintendent is incredibly challenging. In the pandemic, those challenges are exponentially multiplied. The need for consistent leadership and wise decision-making during the pandemic era has stretched some systems and leaders in ways that may be hard to recover from. Throughout this period, superintendents have collectively filled the gap between statewide directives and policies and the intricacies of local implementation. Superintendents have navigated constantly changing conditions and guidance with grace and skill.

Prominent issues continually encountered by superintendents include:

- Safely operating school systems during the pandemic while ensuring that as many students as possible have access to in-person instruction while adhering to complex and restrictive guidelines that limit those opportunities
- Identifying, responding to and exercising influence on policy decisions and directives that negatively impact school communities
- Managing school finances and budget development in complicated, austere times despite the challenges at the local and state level
- Attending as first priority to the safety, educational, and social emotional needs of students and school staff.

Much of the success that has occurred in Vermont can be attributed to the integrity and fidelity with which school districts and SUs have met and exceeded expectations. It is my belief that systems that did the work of merger under Act 46 found themselves far better positioned to navigate the pandemic and its ramifications. Through the clear channels created by mergers as related to safety, continuity of learning, managing students and staff needs, and serving as a consistent and predictable support to the broader community, it is my belief that school operations in COVID-19 in a pre-Act 46 environment would have been significantly more chaotic, fractured, and potentially deadly. I realize that those are strong words. I say them because I mean them. As we continue to survive the pandemic and its effects, the state is logically turning to contemplate a recovery plan. It will be critical that any such planning and expectations around the products of that planning be rooted in reality, useful to the organizations doing the work, achievable, and reflective of the many complex aspects involved with schools, people, and global crises that have affected all of our lives.

Ultimately, it is my hope and wish that the General Assembly does more than just understand the impressive work that superintendents have collaboratively accomplished with the support of boards, staff and communities. It is my hope that the General Assembly recognizes that the best expression of support for school districts at this time does not take the form of new ideas and initiatives. It takes the form of time and space. Time and space to lead through the remainder of the pandemic. Time and space to complete implementation of significant legislation already in place. Time and space to take care of kids, staff and communities. And finally, time and space to finish a good work started. Vermont is full of good people who seek to do the right things for the right reasons, and our schools are but a microcosm of that cultural reality. I wish to thank

you for providing us with the opportunity to deliver on our promises to meet and exceed your expectations and contribute ably to Vermont, its recovery, and its future success. Thank you.

Jeanne Collins, Superintendent for Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, VSA Past President

I am Jeanne Collins, current superintendent (for 7 years) of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in Brandon Vt, serving 8 towns in 2 districts: Otter Valley and Barstow. RNESU is a merged SU and has some very small towns, including Goshen, Whiting and Sudbury, Leicester.

Like everyone we have worked hard to have a strong reopening plan that keeps staff and students safe and healthy. We did a phased-in opening and since October, our elementary students have been in person 4 days a week with a remote option. About 10% of our elementary students choose remote and the classroom teacher streams them into the classroom for lessons. Thus, Wednesday is a planning day for the teacher and students work on Edmentum Learning Path, based on assessments they take, which provides both remedial and enrichment work. Otter Valley Middle School and High School are in person 2 days a week and stream in the other 2 days, again with Wednesday a full remote day for teacher planning. Teaching students both in person and remotely at the same time is a very difficult task that takes extra planning and intentionality and communication needs. About 25% of our MS/HS students chose to stay remote. We have lost a few students to homeschooling but remain connected with those families as we anticipate they will return in the fall. We have leveraged federal dollars to purchase all students a Chromebook, and provide a hotspot as well to families who need the internet. All but a handful of families can access their online learning since we have provided hot spots.. This is an area of equity I feel the state needs to look at, as we will not be able to continue providing hotspots after we return to all in-person classes.

We have learned many things during COVID teaching, in particular:

- The inequities of access is larger than we knew
- The need for parental engagement makes all the difference in student engagement when online
- Offering lessons remotely requires a different lens on the curriculum, with a clear delineation of essential learnings
- Kids miss social time and social emotional learning is more difficult to do remotely
- Some kids thrive in an online environment; other kids do not
- Hazing, harassment and bullying incidents have been reduced significantly as fewer students are in school at once and remote learning is an option
- Opportunities include thinking about how we can continue to be intentional about essential learning and offer more choices and opportunities for students using technology as we return to in person.
- Personally, I would like to see a remote option continue as it allows some older students to meet other needs, such as jobs or family issues and still be able to take classes.

I also would like to talk about H48 and what it means for schools to navigate through town meeting and the budget approval process. I realize it passed the house yesterday and is

headed to the Senate. I appreciate that some of last week's testimony ended up in the bill. Please allow me a few minutes to talk about how this bill plays out in schools.

- RNESU has 8 towns (2 Barstow, and 6 OV)
- Schools have a legislated timeline that has already begun. Thus we are “stuck” with town meeting day for voting already
- Towns are waiting on the legislation to make their determination. That timing is at best two weeks from now, much too late for us to change gears
- 8 towns can pick 8 dates.
- Our votes are co-mingled and we have to wait until the last date
- The law does not have an end deadline- towns can hold their vote anytime in 2021 yet schools must have an approved budget by June 1
- If a town does not use town meeting day to vote, then schools must run a special election and do not have personnel or experience doing so.
- Small towns are not interested in supporting school votes as they also struggle with the people to run an election and for other quirky reasons
- It is important to understand as this law has passed that schools whose schedules differ from towns will need help with the election and may need other legislation that speaks to the June 1 budget date.

Emilie Knisley, Superintendent for Orange East Supervisory Union

I am Emilie Knisley; I serve as the Superintendent of Schools in Orange East SU. I also serve as the trustee to VSA for the Northeast Kingdom region of Vermont. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Orange East serves the towns of Thetford, Corinth, Topsham, Bradford, Newbury, Wells River, Groton, and Ryegate. We have four districts, and seven schools—including a regional technical center and two high schools. The communities have varying levels of economic need. Our free and reduced lunch rates vary, and are as low as 20% in Thetford and as high as 60% in many of our other buildings.

COVID-19 has presented us with many challenges and many successes. We celebrate our food program, our ability to offer both remote and in person options to our families, the willingness of our staff to redesign educational delivery models for our students in new ways. We celebrate our ability to partner with Little Rivers Federal Health Care Center to offer immunization clinics, on-site health care in our buildings, testing and response to the COVID cases —as well as mental health support for students and families with no cost to our schools. We celebrate the dedication of our staff, students, and families. We celebrate their support and perseverance through this all. I admire and thank them all.

Staffing shortages due to positive cases or quarantine needs have challenged us, forcing us to shift to fully remote learning to educate students at times. We have been challenged by the demands put on school nurses and administrators, who just recently worked Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to help contact trace positive cases in the schools, as well as many weekends

and late nights on top of their “typical duties”. We have had schools that have seen no cases, and schools that have seen more than a dozen cases. We have been challenged by the demands of teaching in a pandemic: social distancing, masks, and administering diligent health and safety protocols—we have really changed so much of what we do in our schools. I think that is an important point to remember.

But here is something you need to know: we have done it all, and we have smiled through our masks and made our schools as safe as they can be and as welcoming for students as we can make them, but it has been a massive lift. As we approach month eleven of navigating a pandemic, folks are exhausted...plain and simple. As the vaccine becomes more available we are now working towards recovery, but it will take time for Vermont schools to come back to a new normal.

As you may remember, one of the districts in my SU—Oxbow Unified Union School District is still without an operating budget for this school year. Today is our fourth vote. It is January and we have no approved school budget to operate the four schools in our care. This causes stress for our faculty and staff who worry about their jobs, stress to a school board who wants to be successful and dedicates so much of their time, and that stress trickles down to the students in the classroom and the families in our towns.

Our first budget vote was scheduled to take place from the floor in April—in typical town meeting style. Due to the pandemic, we were forced to postpone our budget vote. We then held a vote via Australian ballot in June. This vote failed by 200 votes. The Board worked to cut the budget and held a second vote via Australian ballot on September 1st. This vote also failed, with less than 15% of the voters turning out. 273 no and 184 yes. The Board cut the budget again. We held a third vote in November, and it failed by fifteen votes with higher turnout. The Board is presenting the same budget that failed in November to the voters today.

OUUSD was created by order of the State Board of Education. It is what is referred to as a “forced merger” of the towns of Newbury and Bradford. On top of the district being merged, we also had another Supervisory District placed into our SU. This means that we have gone through both a district merger and an SU merger. This has meant a lot of change has come quickly—and it has not been voluntary or welcome.

There is strong anti-merger sentiment. There is a belief that the SU is too big, that local control has been stripped back and placed in the hands of a regional school board, administrators and an SU Board. People don't like that feeling.

On December 29th the Town of Newbury held a vote to leave the merged district. The vote to leave did not pass. This is a positive for the new district, but there is a lot of work to do. The lack of budget and the upheaval caused by COVID made many reluctant to add more stress to the system and I think that influenced the votes of many. Despite the anti-merger sentiment, the new district has brought increased sharing of resources, greater collaboration among the board, teachers and administrators, and a popular school choice program amongst families. Teachers

have moved from not supporting the merger to seeing the advantages of collaboration and shared resources in their work.

COVID has made the work of mergers more challenging. Due to the health regulations we can't invite parents and community into our school buildings, we can't gather in public spaces and work through concerns, we can't hold meetings from our school gymnasiums and sit with our neighbors and work through a budget vote. We can't have coffee hours or pancake breakfast to talk about budgets. This has increased the feeling that local connections are being lost due to Act 46 mergers. Zoom meetings have been well attended, but it is not the same as sitting with your community in the same space and engaging in civil discourse. Vermonters expect these types of interactions with their schools and their government. We need time to be able to get past these logistical challenges before we undo the mergers that have already taken place. As you navigate the challenges of this session, I would ask that keep these factors in mind. We have already changed the structure of these school districts, the way in which they vote, the manner in which they interact with their community, and the way that they educate their students. We need time to work on being connected again, in real, human ways--beyond screens--before we focus on shifting our governance work again.

Peter Burrows, Superintendent for Addison Central School District

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today, to share the work happening in Addison Central School District and throughout the state as we navigate the many forces that are coming to bear on education this school year. I wanted to start by sharing how grateful the entire field is of the work that our legislators do to support Vermont schools given the myriad of challenges and pressures we face both as a state and a country. Thank you.

Addison Central School District, comprising the Addison County towns of Bridport, Cornwall, Middlebury, Ripton, Salisbury, Shoreham, and Weybridge, has a strong history of supporting our schools and communities. ACSD voted to become a unified district in 2016. Through strong collaboration and systems-driven work, we've accomplished much together that would have been impossible in our previous structure as a supervisory union. There are many examples of the impact of our work together: becoming an International Baccalaureate World District to prepare students to be reflective and principled in a world that is increasingly global, changes to many of our systems to become more efficient to better serve students, and the ability to develop a singular vision and tackle our demographic and fiscal challenges together.

Financially, we have seen for a few years that the lines between our per-pupil costs and the excess spending threshold were going to cross, and this year, even with staff reductions, our FY22 per-pupil cost has us currently roughly 500,000 over the threshold. Prior to unification, only one of our eight former districts would spend over the excess spending threshold, and a tension that is present in our greater district is balancing spending and resources with the tax burden we believe our community can sustain.

The ACSD Board has been engaged in a facilities master plan over the last four years to work to build a long-range vision for spending and to determine how to keep valuable resources in all

of our schools. This work has ranged from looking at facilities investment in our schools to a lengthy elementary study to consider consolidating resources in fewer schools to increase student access to those resources. The impact of cutting resources every year to stay below the excess spending threshold to avoid double-taxation will continue to diminish supports for all students.

The tension between keeping town elementary schools and diminishing resources is our greatest challenge. As you may know, yesterday, there was a vote to secede by two towns in our district, Ripton and Weybridge. The proposal to secede in Ripton was approved. The proposal to secede in Weybridge was rejected. The Board has recently postponed a final decision on school consolidation until June, to provide more time to engage with our community and work to make a decision together that feels most right for our students.

This work has also brought into high relief the need to designate funds for critical school capital construction needs across the state. Schools in ACSD are in dire need of investment, as are others throughout Vermont, and we have not had state support for capital investment for many years. As local tax burdens continue to rise, I believe it's imperative that the General Assembly returns to its study of school construction aid. Capital investment cannot continue to be delayed given the state's aging school infrastructure. Following the example of other states throughout the country, a thorough assessment and plan for investment should be made so that local districts are not left with this responsibility alone, a responsibility that they can't fund.

COVID-19 has impacted our entire system, as it has to others. What's struck me most about the impact of the pandemic on our district is both how much it has brought us all together, and how much we've needed each other as the level of stress and anxiety people feel has become part of our new normal within the pandemic. We've dealt with innumerable challenges over the last year, and our community has been incredibly flexible in adapting to the shifting realities of health and safety guidance and the services we're able to provide within this context.

Again, I appreciate the work the House Education Committee has done for the students of Vermont, and I look forward to working alongside you as we make our way out of the pandemic and continue to build on the strengths of Vermont's education system.

Julie Regimbal, Superintendent for Missisquoi Valley School District

My name is Julie Regimbal and I am in my 3rd year serving as the superintendent of the Missisquoi Valley School District (MVSD). MVSD was one of the last round of school districts that merged through the state board of education directive and we came into existence on July 1, 2019. Our district comprises the towns of Franklin, Highgate and Swanton. We have approximately 1800 students who attend 3 PK-6th grade schools and then attend grades 7-12 at MVU Middle-High School. Thank you for the opportunity to share the experiences of our teachers, administrators and community during this pandemic.

Last March, the move to close schools and educate students remotely was a huge challenge, but I have to credit our board, administration teachers and community for responding so

incredibly well. Last spring, our food service team, bus companies and teachers worked as a well-oiled machine to deliver 186,675 meals to students between March 23rd and June 15th. That could not have been done without strong support from our teachers union and their “all hands on deck” spirit. We have since moved away from delivering meals to a model where families pick up meals. We are now providing meal boxes where families receive ingredients to make meals at home with families. This has been very popular and has increased participation. I mention these numbers because we know that in Franklin County there are many families for whom food insecurity is a daily issue. We appreciate the focus from the state and federal government on prioritizing feeding our students.

Currently, our students are learning in either an in-person or hybrid model. Franklin Central and Highgate Elementary students are learning in person 5 days a week in grades K-6. Swanton elementary Students are learning in person 5 days a week in grades K-5 and Hybrid in 6th grade. MVU students in 7-12 are in a hybrid model and educated in-person 2 days and remotely 3 days a week.

We also offered a 100% remote instruction option and those that need in-person learning for their children. We had 160 students choose a fully remote option through a partnership with the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative. That has caused some challenges with staffing, but overall, we have been able to accommodate the needs of most of our students and families.

As students returned to school, we knew we needed to focus on the Social Emotional Learning needs of our students. MVSD was very lucky in this regard as we spent last school year developing a set of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies with a multidisciplinary team and the support of the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This work continued remotely even after the closure of schools last March. These competencies gave teachers the tools they needed to embed evidence based practice to support students' emotional well being. We know that a student's ability to regulate themselves and attend to the feelings of others is a prerequisite for success in school and in life. This year, being so extraordinary, it was all the more urgent that we treat students' social emotional functioning through a learning lens rather than a deficit/disciplinary lens. The urgency of the COVID pandemic, coupled with the availability of this new district “SEL Curriculum” created an opportunity to dive in and really change the culture and attitudes about students who struggle in this area.

The largest challenge that we face in this pandemic is the unequal access that students have had to high quality instruction despite the very best efforts of our talented educators. Teachers put into place some very rigorous learning experiences for our students, yet in the end we have more children who are not attending or attending infrequently. We have students with special needs for whom remote learning is ineffective. Regardless of the good plans put in place, we know that the long term effects of COVID 19 could be significant, particularly for children who already experience an achievement gap.

This leads me to touch on a brief discussion about our current and future hopes for the delivery of special education, because I believe what we do now in response to this learning crisis could

either marginalize large groups of students, or redesign a more responsive and effective system for struggling learners.

Definition of special education: In Vermont, the special education delivery system has been built on a definition of special education that requires services above and beyond those offered in the regular education system of support. This has created a model that requires childrens' needs to be diagnosed and labeled before they can get, "more." It has not only pathologized the learning differences of students, created a culture of "more is better" and has resulted in marginalizing students from their classroom teachers. Some of those practices have been obvious, the overuse of pull-out service and paraeducators, for example. Other practices have been more subtle, but are damaging to student outcomes, both individually and systemically. When we define "special" as something other than the classroom teacher, we defer responsibility to someone else for that student's success. The District Management Group highlighted this in their report where most classroom teachers reported feeling under-qualified to teach struggling readers. The result is, Vermont lags in closing the achievement gap and we over-identify some groups of students as needing special education.

Act 173, in part was designed to break this system. The change in who funds services can change who delivers them. The proposed special education rules reflect a change in the definition of special education that will remove the "above and beyond" language and should allow us to put the best teacher in front of the neediest students. Hopefully we can do that with less labeling of students.

For Act 173 to be successful we need to ensure that we redesign our systems in a way that:

- Optimizes staff and their expertise
- Retrains and reshapes the culture of our general education teachers to understand their central role in reaching students with learning and SEL challenges
- Trains our teachers in the instructional practices they need to be expert in teaching literacy and mathematics to students who struggle to learn.
- Ensures that the regulations and **interpretation** of those regulations at AOE support a model that keeps high quality instruction as close to the classroom as possible rather than create layers that remove only serve to sift and sort students (often along socio-economic and cultural lines)
- We have an opportunity to truly use act 173 in a revolutionary way that will help close learning gaps. It is my hope that the urgency of the pandemic recovery will force systems to redesign how we educate struggling learners. If so, Vermont can have a system that focuses more on instruction than it does on identification.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share, not only our experiences during this challenging time, but also our worries and hopes for public education during the recovery period and beyond.