



SLATE VALLEY UNIFIED UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Testimony- H. 630

For the record, I am Brooke Olsen-Farrell, 25 year veteran educator and I have served as the Superintendent of Schools in the Slate Valley Unified Union School District for the past seven years. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on the proposed bill H.630, regional boards of cooperative education services legislation. Our district encompasses the towns of Fair Haven, Castleton, Benson, Orwell, West Haven and Hubbardton in Addison and Rutland Counties. I serve 5 schools and approximately 1,300 students. I am joined by my colleague Dr. Joseph Dragone, who for the past seven years served as Senior Executive Officer at Capital Region BOCES, and currently serves in the role of Director of Special Projects & Strategic Partnerships, and is also an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Russell Sage College. Capital Region BOCES serves approximately 83,000 students across 24 school districts and four counties.

I live in New York State and taught in New York State for 12 years where the school district was part of a regional cooperative known as the WSWHE BOCES. During that time I worked for BOCES part-time delivering professional development.

As you are aware our State is faced with increased costs, declining enrollment, lack of staffing and adequately licensed teachers. While H.630 could be seen as a way to contain costs it is more likely a way to leverage qualified human resources providing a more equitable educational system across Vermont. In Slate Valley, one in five of our teachers are on emergency or provisional licenses; some have never student taught and many cannot pass the Praxis exam. We have teaching and support staff positions that remain unfilled. Currently, Slate Valley has two High School Spanish positions, but only one qualified teacher who switches back and forth between the classrooms. We have special educators, speech language pathologists, classroom teachers who have given up their preparation periods to teach extra classes.

As I visit with colleagues across the state our situation is not unique. Most are burdened with lack of resources to provide access to opportunity for all of our students. We lack adequate outside special education placements for our most challenging students and special educators in our schools. We struggle with cost containment as we are duplicating effort across all school systems in Vermont which aren't large systems to begin with.

In New York, the BOCES systems are responsible for career and technical education, curriculum and professional development (school improvement services), group purchasing, substitute services, technology integration/support, data collection, food service contracts, distance learning, transportation contracts, special education specialized programming, payroll and labor relations support, bulk printing, public relations services, ELL services, homeschooling services among a variety of additional educational and support services. School districts decide what BOCES shared services they wish to participate in.

The mission of Capital Region BOCES is that through partnerships with districts, collectively we can achieve a level of quality, efficiency and effectiveness that would not be possible alone. In short, regional shared services drive efficiencies and eliminate redundancy, providing valuable supports and resources that allow school districts to deliver educational programs and business functions in a manner that would otherwise not be realized. As just one example, from an operations perspective, something as critical as IT infrastructure delivered from a regional perspective creates more buying power, security of operations and opportunities for enhanced educational programs. Capital Region BOCES serves approximately 140 districts through their regional IT infrastructure and services, providing critical access and security functions, hardware support, device procurement and delivery as well as front end functions in districts and complete backend network support. They provide cybersecurity insurance for districts, and are able to secure favorable premiums through their purchasing power. Their leadership in collaboration with regional school districts was critical during the pandemic, and their partnerships with IT suppliers and rapid procurement capabilities supported the deployment of over 20,000 hotspots, 30,000 chromebooks, end user security functions and required screening software that was developed by BOCES programmers to school districts from across the region in a way that never could have been accomplished at the individual district level. A structure such as this in Vermont would rapidly increase the security of our networks, enhance programming and provide support functions that currently do not exist in our schools.

We are at a crossroads in public education in Vermont. Change is inevitable. When faced with increasing costs, declining population and student enrollment, infrastructure and workforce challenges, the reality is further consolidation of services, and ultimately schools, is needed.

As with all things related to change, it isn't necessarily the change, but rather allowing for stakeholders to recognize the transition and adequately prepare for it. That being said, if the legislature decides to move forward with this bill I would encourage careful thought, modeling and a clear plan for implementation. This may be a necessary change for Vermont schools but it won't be an easy change, and as such requires a well reasoned approach. I would be concerned with the Agency of Education's capacity to lead such a change, so again careful consideration is needed. This is just one step in the right direction for Vermont education but further consolidation of resources must be considered.

Respectfully submitted,

Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent SVUUSD

Joseph Dragone, Director of Special Projects & Strategic Partnerships Capital Region BOCES