



# Addison Northwest

SCHOOL DISTRICT

ADDISON | FERRISBURGH | PANTON | VERGENNES | WALTHAM

Submitted to: VT House Ways and Means, Senate Finance, Senate Education, and House Education Committees

From: Sheila Soule, Superintendent, Addison Northwest School District

Subject: Testimony on the Implications of ACT 127

January 25, 2024

I am here to provide testimony on behalf of the Addison Northwest School District regarding the implications of ACT 127 on the FY25 budgeting process. I want to emphasize the unprecedented challenges we face even as a district that remains relatively neutral in the changes to pupil weighting. Our level service budget for FY25 represents a 14.5% increase in expenditures. This includes the continuation of 8 out of 10 ESSER-funded positions due to continued needs. Our budget incorporates \$750,000 in capital spending for middle school expansion, as well as an HVAC and roofing project whose costs unexpectedly doubled. Excluding the cap, the budget carries tax implications of \$0.23 before CLAs are applied (with CLAs reflecting an average increase of \$0.39 across our five-town community). Even if we exclude the capital spending, we still confront an 11% increase, resulting in a \$0.17 rise in the union tax rate without the cap.

While our circumstances may seem less dramatic than many others, I must highlight the proactive steps we've taken to address these anticipated fiscal challenges. In 2020, three years after our ACT 46 merger, we closed the Addison Central School to control costs. This was a divisive and painful process for our community. A year after that school closure we initiated a merger study with the Mount Abraham Unified School District (MAUSD), again to preserve programming and control costs. In the Fall of 2022, the merger proposal ended in a failed vote, and also resulted in the Lincoln School withdrawing from MAUSD, creating yet another district in Addison County. Each subsequent budget cycle feels like a fresh round of zero-sum bargaining and blame.

Despite all our continued efforts, on a per-pupil basis, we remain among the highest-spending districts in the State. Further, our program of studies analysis reveals the bare minimum of High School course offerings with far less diversity as compared to other High Schools. Additionally, our Central Office is smaller than average, with most of us wearing many hats to cover all the bases. At the school level, we employ fewer than five interventionists and have no additional positions such as behavioral support specialists and professional development coaches- positions many other districts have. With no clear options to maintain even our basic level of programs and services, we are left with the difficult choice of continually increasing costs or cutting programs. What is local control? We have no control over this situation. The legislature must understand that we have no other options.

Our proposed budget aims to maintain programs, provide fair but modest wages comparatively, address social and emotional needs, and accommodate uncontrollable costs such as health insurance, transportation, paid leave, PreK, and universal free meals. As the legislature considers the effects on districts that gained or lost tax capacity, please do not lose sight of those of us in the middle with nowhere to go.

We have specific short-term questions that urgently need to be answered: Is there a definite 5% cap, and if not used this year, will it be available later? Is the yield fixed, or will there be further changes potentially putting us under or remaining above 5%? We preliminarily passed a budget with the expectation that our union tax rate will be capped at 5%, which we may rescind on Monday if necessary. If changes are imminent, we urgently request information. The ambiguity surrounding intentions and the lack of clarity in the law are unacceptable. Our message to the legislature is to make the law clear, allowing school boards to inform their constituents about the impacts of what they are voting on.

In the long term, we implore the administration and the legislature to collaborate with school leaders to outline a vision for public education that serves all Vermont students. If we believe every Vermont student deserves access to a next-generation, top-tier public education, what are we doing to bring that vision forward collectively? If our primary focus is on achieving positive outcomes for all learners, let's first establish the vision and subsequently decide how to address our aging facilities. Given that all Vermonters collectively bear the costs of education and facilities, it is imperative that we collaborate to determine the optimal way to invest in our shared future. The current problem cannot be solved with an interdependent funding system and local decision-making.

Thank you for your attention to these critical matters. We appreciate your efforts to create a clear and supportive legislative framework for Vermont's education system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sheila Soule".

Sheila Soule  
Superintendent  
Addison Northwest School District