

**TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO:** House Education Committee

**FROM:** Meagan Roy, Ed.D. Superintendent, Washington Central Unified Union School District

**TOPIC:** Instruction

**DATE:** February 28, 2024

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am aware that this testimony is requested in the context of education finance, and deep discussions about fundamental cost drivers in VT education. Vermont educators and leaders are well aware that it is insufficient to tackle our education funding issues without also looking at what is contributing to costs. This is a challenging conversation in the best of times (and we're arguably not in the best of times). The solutions to many of these issues have become polarized, and we react to "sound bites" rather than looking closely at the complexity of issues that exist. Any one of the cost drivers identified have a finger pointing element to them - with one "side" pointing to a certain kind of solution

Toward that end, and because I know that you will hear from plenty of people in detail about the cost portion, with my comments today I hope to flip the script a bit. I don't think it's hyperbole to say that we're in an intractable financial challenge in education - but I think we will not move this conversation forward until and unless we ground those discussions in what is good for students.

My comments largely address the issue of instruction at scale in Vermont schools - tied mainly to ideas that have been suggested about adult/student ratios and other cost containment strategies related to personnel. I will organize the comments around three issues: **Class sizes for quality instruction**; **expanded offerings at scale**; and the need for **trusted leadership and vision** so that we can think outside of our current contexts. I'll end with some more global comments to this committee as it does its work.

### **Class Size**

The General Assembly has long contemplated adult:student ratio limits as a cost containment strategy. I want to encourage the committee to start first with a look at class size rather than global ratios. Raising the adult:student ratio impacts many critical support roles in schools - mental health clinicians, interventionists, special educators, coaches, etc - arguably not the first place we should look to reduce. Instead, if a look at how schools are staffed is part of the conversation I would encourage the general assembly to consider minimum class sizes, because a look in this area shifts the focus to ensuring quality instructional experiences for students - something that can be negatively impacted by very small class sizes.

In many Vermont schools, our class sizes are not too large - the severe decline in enrollment and school size has resulted in class sizes that are too small for quality instruction to occur. In our smallest schools, class sizes are small by default, not by design. Multiple age groups are taught together, but not because of an instructional commitment to multi age learning - instead, age groups are combined in different configurations each year based on enrollment. Very small class sizes don't allow teachers to use flexible grouping and cooperative learning. It limits the instructional experiences students can have. This is not quality instruction.

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Instead of focusing bluntly on decreasing the number of adults in our schools, we could focus on ensuring class sizes that are conducive to quality instruction. This may even allow us to provide more and better services in the areas we know we need (mental health, intervention, enrichment).

It's beyond the scope of a short testimony to review class size research. It is enough for me to simply state: What we know about class size is that the research is mixed at best, and even the most seemingly advantageous class sizes do not change student outcomes unless the teacher in the room is fully implementing evidence based practices. In other words, the research confirms what we know: the most important factor for instruction is the teacher in front of the students implementing instruction based on best practices.

### **Expanded offerings at scale**

Very small schools make it difficult to offer the robust and quality education we know we want for Vermont students. When you don't have scale, it limits what we can provide in terms of art, music, world language technology, etc. This is not just true for high schools - it is true for elementary schools. If you only have one or two students interested in band or chorus, you don't have band or chorus.

This is about changing the conversation about cost containment from one about reduction, to one of expansion. What could we provide for students if we had scale? What can't we do now in our very small schools?

There are workforce implications for declining enrollment as well. When school districts respond to declining enrollment, they are generally forced to do so by shaving FTE and creating parttime positions, or positions that are itinerant and travel across schools in a district. This limits an educator's ability to feel fully integrated in their school, and sometimes limits their access to the ongoing professional development (when you are traveling instead of fully embedded in the building). In a time of educator shortages, the more we can do to make our teaching positions feel manageable and sustainable, the less likely those teachers will leave to work elsewhere.

### **Trusted leadership & vision**

Our state has Education Quality Standards to operationalize Vermont's vision for public education, and the current draft going through the rulemaking process further illustrates what we believe about education for all Vermont students. We need leadership at the state level that elevates the vision for Vermont education, and grounds all of its recommendations for this funding crisis in what we are doing for students. Absent this vision, the field will respond to cost containment strategies as just that: cost containment. If we instead ground the conversation about the structure of our schools from a framework of what's best for students - not what will save money - people will come to the table..

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**Conclusion:**

Vermont has great schools. And, yet, Vermont is not immune to a need for change. Individuals and organizations are guilty of blind spots when it comes to doing their work, making it difficult to imagine things any other way. I would conclude my comments by reminding the committee to stay student centered in your decisions. Yes, this is about cost containment - but it's really about doing better by students by focusing on good practice. Help the general assembly think outside of our own context.

There is still work to be done that is fully outside of districts' locus of control. We still need to stabilize the education fund so that it is funding education - not food, mental health and construction. There are still intractable costs for our workforce that we do not control (healthcare). And leadership is critical if districts are going to trust any sort of loss of local control.