

## **A Public Education Vermonters Support and Value**

Over the past 14 years Vermont has enacted three sweeping school district consolidation laws. The overarching goals of Act 153, Act 156, and Act 46 were to be achieved **“at a cost that parents, voters and taxpayers value.”** Are consolidated districts delivering on this promise?

A big picture look says no. Consolidation has not saved taxpayer dollars and has eroded Vermonter’s support for public education.

An examination of state per pupil spending data from 2018 compared to 2024 shows that Act 46 consolidated districts have not delivered in terms of cost savings. In this time the percentage of consolidated districts doubled, and costs continued to increase. Today consolidated districts cost more per pupil PK-12 than single-town school districts.

Further, consolidation has eroded public confidence and engagement. At town meeting in March 2024 school budgets in town school districts passed at more than twice the rate of those in consolidated districts— 83% vs. 38%.

No evaluation of consolidation has taken place. The Agency of Education was required to develop reports on Act 46, but the 2020 and 2021 reports have yet to materialize. We cannot afford to compound mistakes or overlook successes by moving forward without a comprehensive analysis. A moratorium on additional consolidation should be in place until a full independent evaluation is completed.

Education spending in Vermont needs to be addressed. But solutions in Montpelier are scarce, apart from calls to double down and “right size” the education system with additional consolidation. Higher per pupil spending and failed budgets in consolidated districts raise legitimate questions about this strategy. We need to take stock.

The legislature has developed a Commission to focus on the Future of Public Education in Vermont. The last time Vermont did this well was in 1968 with the Vermont Design for Education. This document was developed from the bottom up, engaging schools and communities throughout the state.

A new vision for the Future of Public Education should also put the public front and center. The commission needs to emphasize engagement, and incorporate elements that are crucial to the success of public education, including:

- **A focus on equity.** Equity benefits our society as a whole. Rather than pitting rural schools against their larger neighbors in a zero-sum battle, we will benefit from a vision that includes Vermonters from all backgrounds. An outcome that honors the Brigham decision with an equity focus will be better for all.

- **Democracy matters.** When he testified to the Vermont Senate during the creation of what became Act 46, Marty Strange, the Policy Director of the Rural School and Community Trust, proved prescient. Strange warned about a loss of public support for education as an outcome of consolidation. Based on experiences across the U.S., Strange testified,

*“Shrinking the public role in school decision making means more failed budgets, more internecine arguing over where the money goes and whose school gets closed by which voters and reduced public support for public education.”*

Voters’ ability to take part in community-scale school budget deliberations at town meetings may be a key element to local budgets receiving stronger voter support than vast multi-school consolidated budgets.

- **Rural voices.** Any vision for a thriving Vermont education system must work in rural communities as well as in more densely populated areas. It should be shaped and supported by communities, not imposed upon them. Schools are the beating heart of rural communities and an essential foundation for our youngest children. The commission must fully understand the links between schools and community development and examine what happens in a town when its school closes.
- **Best educational practices at a cost Vermonters can afford.** A vision for the future of Vermont education needs to keep children front and center while striving for affordability. Dollars spent with a direct impact on learning should be prioritized over increasingly centralized bureaucracy. Community schools for our earliest learners are a key part of the vision; few Vermonters would say that our younger children should be traveling two hours a day on a school bus. However, sensible changes can take place at the middle and high school level, and the time might be right to revamp secondary and technical education. Additionally, the commission can identify the worthy, but non-education-related services provided within our education system and find funding for them outside of the property tax.

**Vermont can do better.** The Commission will have an opportunity to study education systems internationally. Faced with many of our same issues, Scandinavia, New Zealand, and other places have been decentralizing educational governance to the school/community level since the 1990s. How can these school systems inform our vision?

The Commission needs to develop a vision that is grounded in what works for our children, that builds on our communities’ strengths, and brings Vermonters together: A vision we collectively develop, at a cost that hardworking Vermonters can afford.

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Vermont Design for Education 1968

<https://www.sustainlv.org/one/wp-content/uploads/Vermont-Design-for-Education+.pdf>

Budget data compiled by VASBO.

Per pupil data compiled by the Agency of Education

<https://education.vermont.gov/document/school-district-spending-pupil-fy2024>

<https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-data-per-pupil-spending-fy2018.xlsx>

Chart of comparative spending 2018/2024 (Attached)

