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Shaping Our Future Together

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

From: Patrick J. Reen, Superintendent, Mount Abraham Unified School District

Subject: Testimony on the Implications of ACT 127

January 25, 2024

Like most of my colleagues, I strongly support the spirit of Act 127. Providing equitable educational opportunities to the students in Vermont is essential. That being said, while the implementation of Act 127 has been challenging, I feel it has highlighted a larger issue facing Vermont which is that our current system for education is unaffordable and unsustainable. I fear if we don't make significant changes on a larger scale one of two things will happen. Either tax rates will continue to rise or the programming and support for our students will decrease.

We were one of the many districts looking to increase our budget while staying under the 10% increase per pupil spending to avoid submitting our budget for review. From a level service budget we could either cut approximately \$1 million or add more than \$3 million and in both cases still have a 5% increase in our homestead tax rate. With three failed bond attempts in recent years the opportunity to add money to make important building repairs, like replace a roof, or electrical main, or install a sprinkler system or a new elevator, or replace drafty windows was a welcome opportunity.

As I understand it, we were one district of many who were looking to take advantage of this opportunity. The joint letter from Chairs Kornheiser and Cummings made it seem districts like ours were acting irresponsibly. From my perspective we were pursuing a path that would enable us to make important facilities improvements. A path that was made available to us by Act 127. A path we were pursuing that was well within the bounds of Act 127. Nevertheless, as it became clear that many districts were looking to do the same thing and that the collective impact on the State education funding system could be devastating we decided we would not add the \$3 million we had originally intended to.

Part of the reason we were looking to take advantage of this opportunity in the first place is because we have struggled to fund important facilities projects. Thankfully we have been able to establish and grow a construction services line in our budget and we now have a capital reserve fund we are able to add money to from time to time but these dollars are insignificant relative to the scope of work our schools need. Part of the reason we have not been able to

make these facilities improvements earlier is due to lack of State funding support for these projects. Local communities have been out on their own to figure out how to get this work done and some communities have been successful while others have not.

Local communities have also been on their own to figure out how to make educating students more affordable and sustainable. Several years ago myself and my two other Addison County superintendent colleagues approached the then Secretary of Education asking for support to explore the possibility of merging our three small school districts into a single Addison County district. The response we received was that after Act 46 there was no appetite to engage in this kind of work. Since then our school district has explored closing/repurposing schools and merging with another school district. Local leaders, myself included, were left to bear the brunt of this work. Despite our efforts and years of community engagement we have not closed or repurposed any of our schools and we did not merge with another district. In fact, the number of school districts in Addison County has grown from three to four while the number of students has decreased.

Act 127 is getting a lot of attention right now, and deservedly so. We need to continue to look for ways to increase equity for our students. But shifting the same, rapidly increasing education fund dollars from one district to another does not address the fact that we can't afford to keep doing business as usual. In my experience, local communities can agree that change is needed and maybe even agree on what the change should be, just as long as the change happens somewhere other than their backyard. I believe we need strong leadership at the State level if we are to see the kind of change that will ensure we can give our students the very best we can at a price tag that our community can support. A price tag that doesn't keep Vermont so unaffordable that we can't attract and retain young families which only perpetuates our demographic struggles. Once the wrinkles have been ironed out of Act 127 I encourage you to turn your sights on finding ways to reduce the cost of education in Vermont without taking away the programming and support our students need and deserve.

Respectfully,

Patrick J. Reen
Superintendent
Mount Abraham Unified School District