



**Testimony to House Education Committee
February 13, 2026
By Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)
Steering Committee Members
Cheryl Charles, Ph.D., Chair
Jeanne Albert, Ph.D.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

We are testifying on behalf of the Rural School Community Alliance. I, Cheryl Charles, am chair of the Town of Westminster School Board, chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union Board, and chair of the Steering Committee for the Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA). Dr. Albert is chair of the Lincoln Town School District and a member of the RSCA Steering Committee. The RSCA currently represents members in more than 100 towns and villages in all regions of Vermont. These members are primarily public school district and supervisory union school boards as well as select boards who have voted to join the RSCA since January of 2025. The RSCA advocates for the importance of rural community public schools in Vermont **and** for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future.

We are here today to make the following key points:

- **Cooperative education service areas (CESAs or BOCES) can be implemented statewide in Vermont as a way to achieve cost-savings quickly.**
- **Supervisory unions demonstrate cost-savings and improved educational quality while maintaining community vitality and democratic values, especially in rural Vermont.**
- **Evidence does not support forced mergers of school districts.**

Here is more detail in support of these key points.

Cooperative education service areas (CESAs or BOCES) can be implemented statewide in Vermont as a way to achieve cost-savings quickly.

The Vermont legislature passed Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) legislation in July 2024 (Act 168). The stated intent, was for BOCES to be “one of the initial steps in ensuring the opportunity to transform Vermont’s educational system.”

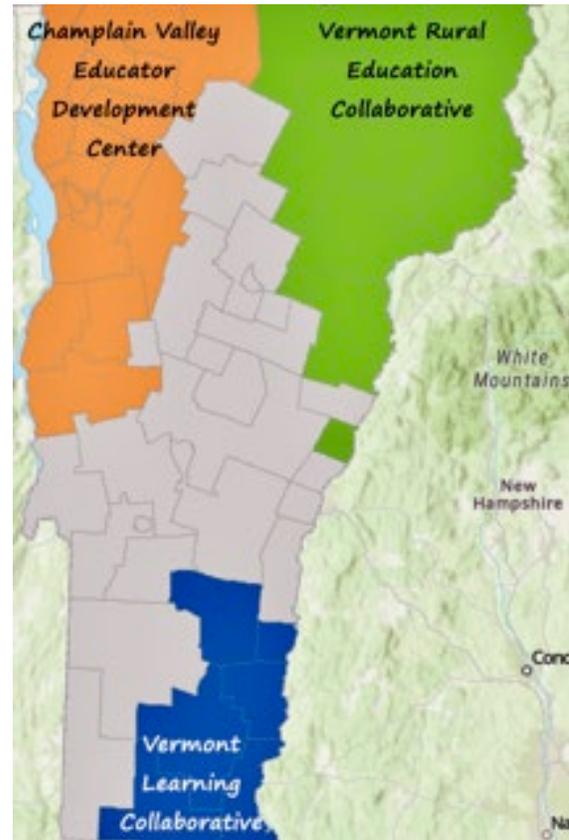
BOCES and similar education collaboratives have reduced costs significantly in other states. The ability for school districts and other entities to share resources and reduce costs, as well as improve quality, has been well documented. You have heard testimony with data to support these benefits from leadership of the Association of Educational Service Agencies; Jill Graham, Executive Director of the Vermont Learning Collaborative; Mountain Views Superintendent Sherry Sousa, who is one of the leaders in developing the new Southeast Vermont BOCES; Erin Maguire, former President of the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators and other experts in special education in Vermont; as well as others.

The Act 73 Redistricting Task Force provided a thoughtful, well-documented set of recommendations to be implemented generally in sequence: Cooperative Education Service Areas (CESAs); Strategic Voluntary Mergers; and Comprehensive Regional High Schools. We support and recommend their findings be implemented. The first step is the development of CESAs or BOCES. **RSCA supports the Task Force recommendation to require all school districts and supervisory unions to participate in a CESA or BOCES.** We do so because this requirement does not dismantle current governance models but does achieve the goal of every district and supervisory union in the state participating in a

thoughtful and proven structure for achieving efficiencies, cost savings, and improved services to children and youth. Mandatory participation in a shared services model still allows for selectivity in terms of which services are most relevant to each participating member, with costs adjusted proportionately. We do recommend that districts and SUs be able to move from one CESA to another, if evidence supports doing so.

Figure 1: Existing Collaborative Partnerships

The map at right reflects some current examples of cooperative educational service area models in place in Vermont, including the Vermont Rural Education Collaborative, the Vermont Learning Collaborative (as of January 6, the Southeast Vermont BOCES), and the Champlain Valley Educator Development Center. This map shows the scale of those three current collaboratives in Vermont.



Implementation Steps Outline

At the end of this document, we've included a set of steps for implementation the RSCA has developed that are consistent with the recommendations of the Task Force. We have additional detail we could provide in support of each of these steps.

There are many benefits to the shared-services approach. As all school districts and supervisory unions become part of a CESA, they will not only see savings immediately in some areas, they will become accustomed to working together to find other ways to save while improving services. As more administrative services are coordinated and moved to a regional level, that in turn frees up local leadership to focus on instruction and educational quality. **School district mergers do not result in cost savings. Regional coordination of shared services do.**

Existing Vermont BOCES: Southeast Vermont Pilot

The Southeast Vermont BOCES proposal grew out of the work of the Vermont Learning Collaborative, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed to support collaboration among school systems in the southern part of the state, particularly north and south near the Connecticut River. The current executive director, Jill Graham, has extensive experience with the shared educational services model in Massachusetts as well as nationally. With the passage of Act 168, the school systems which had already been working together for years in the Vermont Learning Collaborative developed Articles of Agreement for a Southeast Vermont BOCES. They worked over many months, formally circulating the Articles in July of 2025. By December of 2025, all supervisory unions and school districts in the Collaborative had signed the Articles. That proposal for formal recognition as **the first shared services cooperative developed under Act 168 was formally approved by the AOE in early January.**

Here are examples of cost savings. This cost analysis compared services provided by the current regional education service provider (Vermont Learning Collaborative) to those of alternate providers used by our member Supervisory Unions and Districts. Data was provided by business office personnel regarding their expenses for comparative services. This analysis focuses on five current main areas of shared services: professional development, evaluation services, staffing services, consultation and programming.

Products & Services Provided	Cost Savings and Benefits for Members
<p>Professional Development Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>De-escalation training</i> ● <i>Hazing/Harassment and Bullying Prevention and Intervention training</i> ● <i>Special Education laws and regulations</i> ● <i>Supporting students with mental health challenges</i> ● <i>Classroom based Tier One interventions for students with mental health needs</i> 	<p>Supervisory unions and districts saved an average of 66 percent on professional development costs by using their regional service agency compared to individually hosting these events. Professional development was hosted locally or virtually saving staff time and transportation costs.</p>
<p>Evaluation Service Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Comprehensive Autism Evaluations</i> ● <i>Psycho-educational evaluations</i> ● <i>Speech and Language Evaluations</i> 	<p>By using their regional educational service agency, member supervisory unions' and districts' savings ranged from 20 - 50 percent on evaluation services yielding an average savings of 38 percent. No waiting lists were necessary; therefore, all evaluations were provided within special education compliance timelines. Providers are regionally localized thereby reducing travel time and associated costs compared to other providers.</p>
<p>Staffing Services Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Speech and Language Services</i> ● <i>Board Certified Behavior Analyst</i> 	<p>In person services provided to student(s) in out of district settings ensuring free and appropriate education access for students. The regional service agency is able to hire and fulfill multiple part time FTE positions shared regionally across Supervisory Unions/Districts ensuring service needs are met and cost savings are reduced by up to 50 percent or more per FTE.</p>
<p>Supervisory union/District Consultation Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Program Review</i> ● <i>Program Restructuring</i> 	<p>Accessing their regional educational service agency for supervisory union/district consultation saved members up to 62 percent in consultation fees. Services focused on increasing supervisory unions and districts' capacity to provide in-house programming for complex learners, with the goal of reducing reliance on outside placement services.</p>
<p>Special Education Programming Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Elementary K - 6 Social Emotional Programming</i> 	<p>By partnering with their regional educational service agency, member supervisory union/districts are committing to local programming within their school settings thereby providing students access to a range of programming that includes the least restrictive setting. Currently, the southeastern area of Vermont has a severe lack of high quality therapeutic programming. The model of using the regional service agency allows for higher quality, closer to home programming for students, with a continuum of most to least restrictive settings to support students' growth and fulfilling the ultimate goal of returning to their home supervisory union/district. Anticipated average supervisory union/district savings for service fees and transportation are expected to be up to 85 percent of their current out of supervisory union/district expenses.</p>

The members of this new CESA (BOCES) are Mountain Views Supervisory Union, Springfield School District, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union, Two Rivers Supervisory Union, Windham Central Supervisory Union, and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. According to AOE data, there are about 8000 students who will be served by this CESA.

As Chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union Board, I (Cheryl) signed the agreement on behalf of the WNESU. We are already seeing savings. The most substantial initial savings are in an area for which costs have grown dramatically in recent years: services for students with special needs. Sending students out of district to get the services they need, and are required by law, is more expensive than serving them within our supervisory union. However, many of these students need special expertise. It is a dramatic cost savings for us, for example, to have the CESA hire the specialists we need; then we share the cost on a pro rata basis as needed, rather than bearing the cost of a full-time employee.

Supervisory unions demonstrate cost-savings and improved educational quality while maintaining community vitality and democratic values, especially in rural Vermont. Evidence does not support forced mergers of school districts.

A supervisory union is itself a tested and effective shared service model. Vermont-specific evidence from the AOE supports the position that supervisory unions are the most cost-effective structure to provide quality education and manage rising costs, especially in Vermont's rural areas. ***Cost-effectiveness, local accountability, community identity and retention of local knowledge are among the reasons that the RSCA strongly advocates for the continued role of supervisory unions as one of Vermont's preferred educational governance structures.***

After the passage of Act 73, the RSCA encouraged all member school districts and supervisory unions to read and discuss the law with their communities. School boards held meetings with their neighbors, had conversations about forming shared service models or merging with their neighbors, and documented their preferences which they sent in the form of public comment to the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force.

In total, 26 school boards representing 100 towns passed motions expressing their preference to remain in a supervisory union.

The Act 73 Redistricting Task Force received public comment from over 5,000 individuals and school boards. Their voices demonstrated NO support for the forced merger of school districts and NO consensus that a map of large, state-mandated school districts will bring about positive transformation of our education system, in large part due to the significant disruption it would cause with no demonstrated benefits.

However, that does not mean school boards are fearful of change and unwilling to do their part. **The public record demonstrates the willingness of rural school boards to find solutions.** All the public comment and other documents are available at the Agency of Administration web site: <https://aoa.vermont.gov/school-district-redistricting-task-force/redistricting-public-comment>

Here are excerpts from three examples (see final page for links.)

Essex North Supervisory Union (ENSU), North Country Supervisory Union (NCSU), Orleans Central Supervisory Union [OCSU] They provided a particularly robust position paper that outlined the reasons they propose to stay in their current supervisory unions. They stated that, while "large-scale consolidation is not a viable option for our region, we are strongly supportive of a cooperative services framework modeled after the BOCES structure. Given our geography, scale and shared service history, we believe this model represents the most practical and equitable path forward for the Northeast Kingdom."

Caledonia Cooperative School District They stated, “The Caledonia Cooperative School District (Barnet, Walden and Waterford Schools) has a strong desire to remain in a Supervisory Union model.” They note that the district has already started to reach out to St. Johnsbury School District and Kingdom East to explore the potential of forming an enlarged supervisory union.”

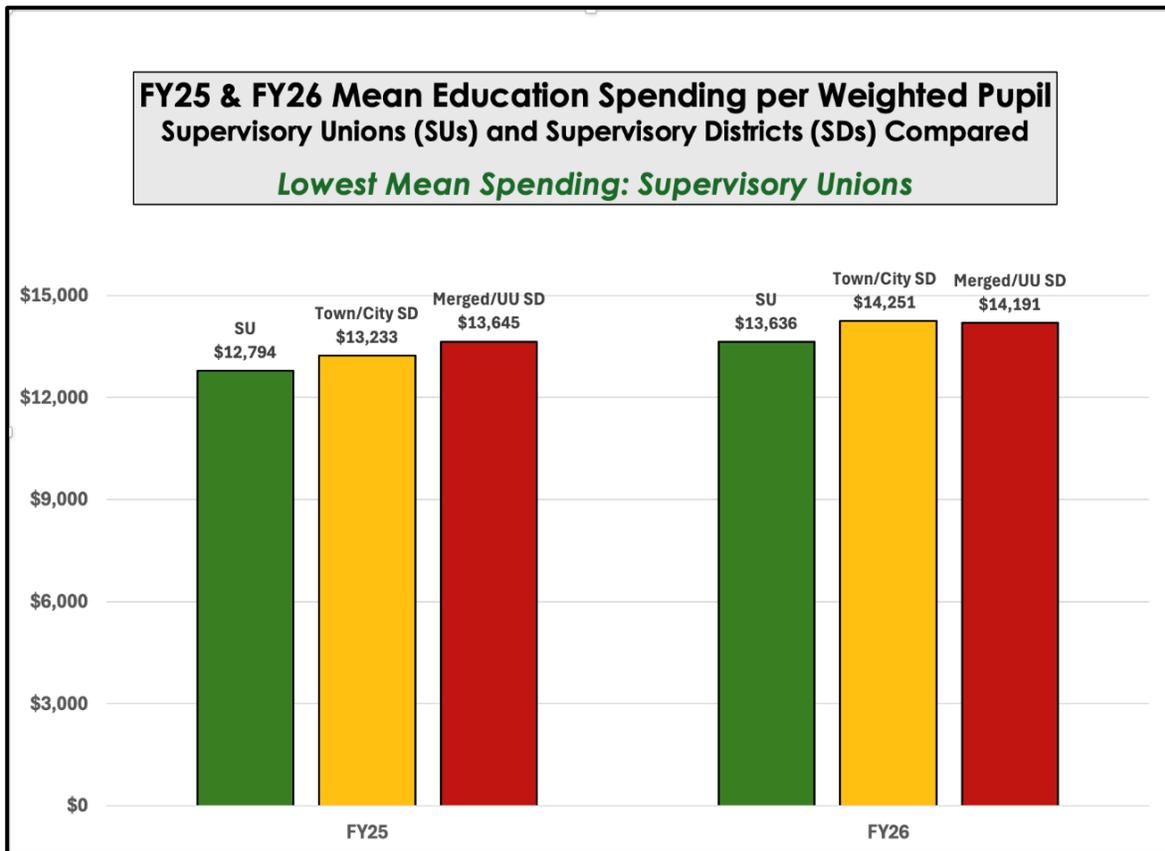
Grand Isle Supervisory Union (GISU) The GISU Board passed a resolution that included this statement, “Consolidating the existing three districts into a single Grand Isle County District and subsequently forming a larger supervisory union with mainland district partners aligns with the objectives of ACT 73 and the mandate of the Redistricting Task Force. This approach effectively addresses our geographic isolation and leverages established community connections to facilitate logistically viable local schools. “

These examples of public comment demonstrate the conscientious and vital work undertaken by Vermont’s school boards to understand the implications of the law and make commitments to strive to meet its intent. **They are tangible evidence of organically established, voluntary partnerships in action.** Locally elected school boards are an asset and an essential component in translating Vermont’s vision for the future into a lived reality.

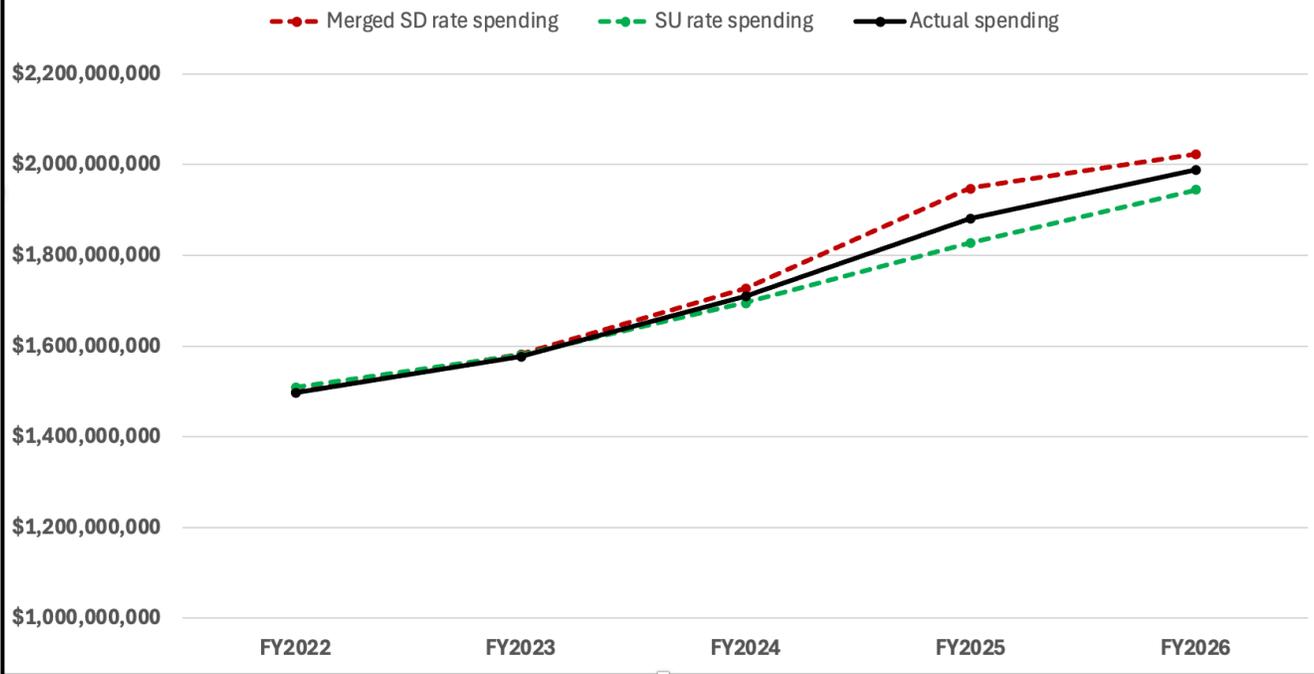
In sum: imposition of a map of districts such as you are currently exploring would transform Vermont’s current system to a centralized system unfamiliar throughout New England. Research demonstrates poor results from this approach in delivering savings or improving student outcomes in rural states. **Change imposed by force has little likelihood of success.**

Evidence from Vermont

A supervisory union is a version of a shared services model. Here are charts that demonstrate their cost-effectiveness using Vermont Agency of Education Data.



Vermont Education Spending Totals: FY22 to FY26
Actual Spending vs.
Spending at Supervisory Union and Merged Supervisory District Rates
FY24 to FY26
Merged SD rate: \$120 million added spending
SU rate: \$112 million reduced spending



Sources for charts: RSCA, based on AOE Data

As the charts displayed above indicate, supervisory unions have been an effective way for school districts in Vermont to reduce costs through shared services, and this is especially evident when compared to the merged, supervisory district model. The second chart shows projected differences between actual state education spending (black solid line) and state spending that would result from instead using per-pupil spending rates for supervisory unions (green dashed line) or merged supervisory districts (red dashed line) statewide. As noted, the projected total difference over the past few years is stark: a \$112 million *reduction* using the supervisory union rate, relative to actual education spending, versus an *increase* of \$120 million using the merged supervisory district rate. **These data from Vermont provide strong evidence for pursuing an expanded shared services model, through the CESA framework.**

CONCLUSION

(1) ***Vermonters are strongly opposed to forced mergers, as evidenced by public engagement with the Redistricting Task Force.*** The effort to persuade voters to accept large mandated school districts is unlikely to succeed, would further erode public trust, and would waste precious time that could be used instead to quickly enact a system of statewide CESAs/BOCES.

(2) ***The merged supervisory district model has not produced cost savings, compared to multi-member supervisory unions.*** Given this reality, it is unwise to expand them further, especially in rural areas where large geographic area and sparse population makes them even less practical. It makes more sense to “achieve scale” via CESAs, by expanding the shared services SU model that has a proven record of cost effectiveness.

(3) **Cost sharing though CESAs will likely suggest further voluntary merger opportunities**, after local management of administrative and other services has been greatly reduced. During this phase, the state could facilitate merger conversations between SU/SD neighbors, with expanded high school and CTE opportunities a priority.

(4) **For rural districts that don't operate in some all grades, designation of just a few schools can be highly problematic.** Large geographic area means greatly varied work and travel patterns of families. These travel patterns play an important role in determining where children can reasonably attend school and take advantage of extracurricular and other opportunities. Before considering imposed designation of schools, we urge the committee to hear more voices of rural families who will be negatively impacted.

(5) Finally, **for change in our education system to be successful, it must be done with the support of Vermonters across the state.** The RSCA grew very quickly, because the Alliance reflects the reality on the ground in rural areas of Vermont. The best way forward is solving problems together using an inclusive, participatory process—especially at a time when democracy is under threat all across the country.

We are happy to respond to questions as well as to provide additional information and testimony in specific areas of interest.

Implementation Steps Outline: Statewide CESA map and Strategic Voluntary Mergers

1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Develop a statewide Map of Cooperative Education Service Areas <i>CESA boundaries established by the state that build on existing regional collaborations All SUs and SDs provisionally assigned to a CESA, with realignment possible</i> ★ Conduct comprehensive District and SU Data Analysis, supported by Agency of Education <i>Establishes foundation for a research-based, data-driven, evaluative process to assist districts and SUs Determines effective practices along with statewide variation in spending & outcomes Develops systems for continued educational monitoring, including sustainability planning for districts experiencing enrollment instability or decline</i>
2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Incentivize voluntary Strategic Mergers at District and SU level <i>Data analysis will identify beneficial service/administrative sharing options Cost sharing though CESAs will suggest further voluntary merger opportunities School construction incentivization: strategic mergers that expand high school and CTE access and quality can be prioritized</i>
3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Implement Professional Judgement Panels to Provide Guidance and Refinement of Funding Formula <i>Use data and analysis, site visits, etc., to inform funding formula impacts on districts and SUs Identify adjustments to formula or funding changes needed before implementation</i>