

Testimony of Pamela J. Reed

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Good morning, Chairs Conlon and Bongartz, and Members of the House and Senate Education Committees; Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would also like to thank the members of the Senate Education Committee who recently visited Rutland City Public Schools. We thoroughly enjoyed having you there and are grateful you took the time to visit our schools.

My name is Pam Reed, and I am the Superintendent of Rutland City Public Schools. I appreciate the work this group is doing to look closely at how we fund and structure education in Vermont. Today, I will share a few thoughts from a superintendent's perspective as I address the three points outlined in my invitation to testify. Specifically, I will discuss my response to the work of the redistricting task force, my hopes for this legislative session regarding Act 73, and the key ingredients for excellent educational opportunities.

Redistricting Task Force

I was asked to address the work of the Redistricting Task Force. I'll start by saying that I agree with many of the goals embedded in Act 73. Increased equity and better educational outcomes are something everyone across the state should wholeheartedly support, and I certainly do. Our district remains open to redistricting, conceptually. But as with any policy shift, the devil is in the details.

The Redistricting Task Force had an incredibly difficult and complex mandate, and probably not enough time to fully carry it out. I guarantee that we would not have opposed all redistricting proposals outright. But we did leave the process relieved with the outcome, specifically because the CTE-based district map that was floated raised serious concerns for us.

Our concern was not about mandated regional collaboration. In fact, we actively pursue local partnerships and coordination, and we already engage in shared programming and services where appropriate. The issue for us was the governance structure that accompanied the CTE-based map. Moving Rutland City Public Schools into a supervisory union, rather than maintaining our current school district model, would not be effective for our operational framework or the needs of our students.

I certainly am not saying that the structure would not work anywhere, but for our district, it would have disrupted a model that is already working well and serving students effectively. Rutland is here to collaborate, and we simply ask that any future plans involving governance change be grounded in a true understanding of how each community functions. For us, the SD structure enables us to plan across schools, align services, and manage operations efficiently. It strengthens our instructional coherence, which directly benefits students.

Since I shared our concern about the CTE map with you, I'll highlight the benefits of the CTE map from my perspective. In our district, we benefit from having the Stafford Technical Center integrated into our system and attached to our high school. That proximity strengthens access, coordination, and quality for students. The CTE map preserves access to Rutland area high schools. Becoming one district with our area high schools would bring continuity to our students attending our Career and Technical Center, as curricular decisions and credit acquisition would become cohesive and consistent.

Overall, moving toward more standardized and common practices across the state would help address some of the long-standing equity issues faced by students in smaller or more isolated schools. These practices should not just apply to business operations at the district or supervisory union, but also to efficiencies at the school building level and to the support available to students and the quality of instruction they receive.

Legislative Session Outcomes

I was asked to discuss the outcomes I hoped for during this legislative session. The prompt I was given was to discuss how the legislative session could support me regarding Act 73. I have a couple of ideas.

We need modeling before implementing any new funding formula. Vermonters deserve to see clear estimates of what the changes would actually do on the ground, district by district. That includes modeling under the current district configuration. We appreciate that early on last session, the legislature modeled a few scenarios of the foundation formula for districts to review. That kind of transparency was very helpful. But since then, the formula as passed has changed from earlier versions, and we have yet to see any modeling.

Under Act 73, the foundation formula was designed to take effect only if a statewide redistricting process was triggered. That link was intentional. If lawmakers decide to move forward with the foundation formula separately, without first redrawing district lines, it is essential for the AOE and the Joint Fiscal Office to release their modeling to show the effects of the foundation formula in Act 73 on school districts as they currently exist.

We can compare the work done for Act 73 to the work done ahead of implementing Act 127. That process was grounded in extensive modeling from Professor Tammy Kolbe and the UVM team. We had district-level projections, estimated tax impacts, and time to review what the changes would mean. In Rutland City, for example, that modeling showed a 22 percent reduction in our tax rate. Districts like ours have made significant progress under Act 127, which we are only now beginning to realize. We are concerned that, without careful study first, this new model could have unintended consequences that might include reversal of some of the long-awaited progress from Act 127, which has only been in effect for just three fiscal budgets.

The second hope I have for this legislative session is focused on the concept of volunteer consolidation. Over the past decade, it has become clear that most local communities are unlikely to choose to close schools or relinquish local governance on their own. If the state wants systemwide change, then it must be clearly directed and likely incentivized. Leaving it to local decisions will not get us there.

There is a lot of attention on central office consolidation. That is part of the picture, but it will not be enough to deliver the results we all want. If we are serious about improving outcomes and controlling costs, then we must examine how schools operate on a day-to-day basis. That includes staffing, curriculum, facilities, transportation, and the support we provide to students within their educational programs.

I want to be very clear about one thing. Superintendents are not holding this back. The desire to maintain the status quo runs deep in communities and school boards. That resistance is understandable. People are attached to their schools and communities. But it means that voluntary change is unlikely, without some kind of incentive that makes the immediate disruption worthwhile.

Excellent Educational Opportunities

The third request of my testimony was to discuss the ingredients for excellent educational opportunities. I could have probably spent the full 30 minutes talking about this prompt alone. I have narrowed my list of ingredients to 8.

1. Equitable and predictable funding. Schools must have resources aligned to student needs, not just enrollment counts. Students experiencing poverty, disability, or language barriers require additional, sustained investment. Funding needs to be predictable, as districts cannot plan high-quality programs when funding is uncertain and fluctuates. One last point on equitable funding. Equity does not mean equal spending; it means sufficient support for every learner to succeed.
2. High-quality, Supported Educators are the next ingredient on my list. Students thrive when taught by skilled and supported professionals. We need an approach to compensation that is competitive to recruit and retain educators, especially in rural and high-need areas. An excellent system invests not only in students, but in the adults that serve them.
3. Early Childhood Education programs, and strong transitions between early learning providers and their K-12 programs, are my third component of excellent educational opportunities. Achievement gaps do not begin in kindergarten, but they will widen there if we do nothing. We need to expand universal access to high-quality early education. Early investment is one of the most powerful equity strategies we have.
4. My 4th ingredient addresses the need for comprehensive student supports. Students cannot learn if their basic needs are not met. Education policy must recognize that student

well-being (i.e., access to mental health services, counselors, nurses, social workers, trauma-informed and restorative practices) and academic achievement are inseparable.

5. The 5th ingredient connects rigor and relevance, as well as flexible learning opportunities. Excellence means preparing students for their futures. Personalized pathways to success that honor students' interests, strengths, and aspirations need to be creatively incorporated into every student's educational experience.
6. Inclusive and accessible learning environments are key to excellent education opportunities. Equity requires that every student belongs. This includes robust special education and multilingual learner services. It includes accessible instructional materials and programs that meet diverse student needs, as well as culturally responsive practices that reflect and respect Vermont's increasingly diverse communities. Inclusion is not a program- it is a commitment.
7. Our facilities must be modern, safe, and well-maintained, regardless of the age of the school building. Across all regions of the state, we need to provide safe, healthy, and energy-efficient facilities, along with a capital funding system that does not disadvantage small or rural districts.
8. The final ingredient is no less important than any other I've mentioned, and that is the need for strong community and family partnerships. Education is a shared responsibility with schools working in partnership with families, businesses, and community organizations. This would include regional collaboration among districts to expand opportunities and reduce duplication.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, excellence in Vermont education is not accidental—it is the result of intentional policy choices grounded in equity, sustainability, and respect for local context. If we commit to these ingredients, we can ensure that every Vermont student—regardless of their address—has access to the high-quality education they deserve.

Vermont's education system faces real challenges, and we cannot meet them without being honest about the tradeoffs. We also must not break things that are working well in an effort to fix the things that aren't. Rutland City Public Schools, and many other districts, are thriving, and that success and progress, especially under Act 127, should be protected, not jeopardized.

If the goal is a better, fairer, and more efficient system, the state must provide detailed, public fiscal modeling of what is being proposed. If voluntary consolidation is the path forward, districts will need real directives and incentives to make it work.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.