

Testimony of Retta Dunlap  
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EdWatchVT ~ [www.edwatchvt.org](http://www.edwatchvt.org)  
House Education Committee  
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## Who am I?

My name is Retta Dunlap and along with Alison Despathy, we are co-directors of EdWatchVT. It has been a nonprofit in Vermont for many years, though it has not been very active. We are stepping in to revive it, to be a voice for parents and children seeking education freedom from the Legislature. You can learn more at [www.edwatchvt.org](http://www.edwatchvt.org) which is still being updated.

Over the past 30 years, I have testified on pre-K, consolidation, flexible pathways, dual enrollment, and college vouchers for high school students. I have served on legislative study committees, most recently appointed by the Governor in 2022 on the Afterschool Study Committee. I also served on the statewide consolidation study committee and chaired my local district's consolidation process, which now operates as one district with one high school, one early education center, and family choice among four elementary schools.

## Why am I here?

To be clear, although I have worked as a homeschool advocate in this building, I am not here today in that capacity for one very simple reason: Over the past 30 years, I have spoken with many families who do not want to homeschool but who feel something is wrong with education and do not know what to do about it. They feel like they have no voice.

Take a mom I know with a two-year-old son. Her local elementary school is labeled "above proficient." Yet she sees teenagers in her community who cannot fill out a check, read cursive, or make change. She has to work. She does not want to homeschool. Yet she feels she may have to teach him the basics herself when he goes to the public school. She is not alone.

## What is the problem?

Chronic absenteeism in Vermont is about 30 percent, and it has increased since COVID. Why?

There is a 17-year-old in this state — I won't share details — who checks in for attendance every morning and then leaves the school. He returns only for the classes he needs to graduate and then leaves again. Strengthening truancy reporting requirements in law does not begin to address why this student — and others who are not technically truant — do not want to be in these schools.

Families matter. But schools are not bystanders.

If a child spends seven hours a day, year after year, in school and still cannot read proficiently, the system is accountable. We cannot keep pointing only to poverty, parents, or special needs as the problem.

When a method fails year after year, it must change.

There is only one mechanism that ensures it does: put the student at the center, let funding follow the child, and give parents the power to choose.

When families control the decision, the system finally answers to the child.

Vermont already has the students, the teachers, and the school buildings — both public and independent — to build a truly student-centered education system. We just need to organize it for success. None of this will save money or improve outcomes unless parents choose which school their children attend. None of this will work unless there is real variety among schools in the state — which means independent schools removed from tuitioning must be reinstated, including specialized schools such as ski academies that were previously eligible.

Here is what a **student-centered education** system should look like placing responsibility in the right places. I will do so with a high-level description in five parts: funding, the state, schools, parents, and students.

## The Solution

**Funding** – Education funding must be simple and transparent and distributed through a single, statewide structure. The state sets a per-student amount for general education, with additional allocations for special education and transportation as needed. Funding follows the student to the chosen school. Schools — public or independent — operate within that amount. This shifts the system from funding institutions to funding students.

**State** – The state’s role is governance, not operation of schools. The State Board of Education oversees the structure, financing, and approval of public and independent schools. The Agency of Education administers it. The state sets standards and accountability but does not dictate pedagogy. To ensure genuine variety and meaningful choice, the current statutory eligibility criteria to receive funding must be revised. As written, those criteria exclude previously approved independent schools and reduces options for students. Eligibility should reflect educational quality and family demand — not arbitrary thresholds.

**Schools**, both public and independent, govern themselves, hire staff, design curriculum, and determine methods and pedagogy within the per-student allocation. They are accountable for reading, writing, and math proficiency, financial transparency, and family satisfaction. Small local schools should not be closed simply to achieve administrative consolidation or projected cost savings. A student-centered system would allow them to thrive while respecting Vermont’s geography and communities.

**Parents** choose the school that best fits their child and family. They may move their child if that school fails to meet their needs. They are responsible for ensuring attendance, readiness to learn, and overall well-being. Choice gives parents leverage — and leverage ensures the system answers to the child.

**Students** are entitled to a safe educational environment that meets their individual needs and supports their academic development. The system exists to serve students — not the other way around.

## Closing

**In closing, I would like to end with this.**

Mississippi is now outperforming Vermont in both math and reading. When you compare similar student populations — such as Mississippi’s non-Hispanic students with Vermont’s non-Hispanic students — Vermont’s reading and math scores fall even further behind. And Mississippi is doing this while spending roughly half of what Vermont spends per child.

We are one of the highest-spending states in the nation on education. They are near the bottom. They are gaining ground in reading and writing. We are not.

At some point, we have to ask whether the issue is consolidation — or whether the structure of the system itself is the problem and must change.