

January 13, 2026

My name is Tim Payne and I have served as superintendent of the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union since July 2025. The SVSU serves the communities of Pownal, Bennington, Woodford, North Bennington, Shaftsbury, Arlington and Sandgate. As a supervisory union we support communities operating both public schools grade K-12 and non-operating districts with school choice K-6 and K-12. The SVSU serves roughly 3,100 students, and creates an exceptional learning community that includes a wide range of academic accomplishments. These include our outstanding AP scores that outperform state and national averages, an emphasis on fine arts with a comprehensive K-12 arts and music program, and flexible pathways where our community-based learning opportunities provide our students with real-world experiences. Additionally, our communities are economically diverse, with free and reduced rates ranging from 65-100%. Like many school communities in Vermont, we face the challenges of absenteeism, increased mental health needs and lack of alternatives for students not served by a traditional school setting.

I want to thank Senator Bongartz for the opportunity to speak to the Senate Education Committee today. I am new to the position of superintendent, so I might appear to be an odd choice to speak. But I have been a resident of Bennington County since 1994 and have served the last 13 years as a building principal at Mt. Anthony Union Middle School then Mt. Anthony Union High School. Senator Bongartz has shared that his hope for Act 73 is to increase opportunities for all students. I support this goal. My purpose today is to answer his question, “what should be the focus of education reform in this legislative session toward that goal?”

My first suggestion is to set the map discussion aside and focus on fixing how we pay for school. From my observation, the map discussion has not produced a clear next step, and the result has been to sow division among neighbors and increase frustration in state government and the AOE. When I am asked by elected officials and community members about drawing maps, I answer with a question - If the current school districts in Bennington county were merged under Act 73, how would a student living in Pownal access school choice in Manchester? Bennington County is made up of communities with long traditions of both school choice and public schools. If you can't answer the question in a way that offers all students a better opportunity, then why are we talking about maps?

As a new superintendent, I have spent the fall speaking with community groups and explaining how school budgets are developed under the current system. Long time residents are stunned when I tell them that much of the process determining their property taxes happens after they vote on a school budget. They are equally surprised to learn that their taxes fund the entire state of Vermont and not their community school directly. And good luck, explaining why a resident of Shaftsbury pays a different property tax rate than a resident of Bennington. The current

system is confusing and filled with accounting maneuvers that change every year and yet we are all amazed that taxpayers are increasingly frustrated with being unable to afford to live in Vermont. My interactions with community members over the past few months have solidified my understanding that there is an immediate need for an equitable and predictable system to pay for education in Vermont.

Returning to Senator Bongartz's goal of providing better opportunities for all students, I would offer the following suggestions for your consideration. First, adopt a budget process that tells a community how much money they have at the start of decision making. Then trust local schools to make decisions on how to fund their schools that are reflective of their community values and needs. Ideally, that budget number would also change at a predictable rate over time, reducing the annual anxiety over property taxes produced by the current process. Second, reward school districts to be innovative and experiment with how they deliver an outstanding education for every student. The AOE could encourage this new approach by eliminating the endless compliance checklists which would then free both resources and time to improve instruction and student achievement. Lastly, if schools are going to accept state tax dollars they should meet common expectations and routine requirements. All schools should provide clear improvement goals, present their budgets to the community for feedback, be prepared to justify their requests, and share their student growth over time.

As the legislature returns to its business, the easy route is to ask schools to do more with less. With a declining student population, that request is understandable but does not address the fact that the legislature has repeatedly added initiatives without providing any funding. In my time as a building principal, I added school based clinicians, contracted with outside providers for students with Autism and hired a HHB coordinator. The recent state mandate to update, add, and provide training around AEDs in schools, will cost the SVSU \$70,000 in the first year. This does not take into account maintenance and training for years to come. That amount is equal to the salary and benefits of a new teacher.

As you consider your next steps, I leave you with two questions: what do you need schools to do, and how are you going to pay for it?