



**Testimony to House Education Committee
March 26, 2025
By Cheryl Charles, Ph.D., Chair,
Steering Committee, Rural School Community Alliance**

Good morning. Thank you, Chair Conlon, for the opportunity to testify today, and thanks to you and each of the members of this committee for your thoughtful efforts.

I am in my tenth year as a member of a Vermont school board. I currently chair both the Westminster and Windham Northeast Supervisory Union school boards.

I am testifying today on behalf of the **Vermont Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)**. The Alliance currently has 82 members in 74 towns in all regions of Vermont. These members are school district and supervisory union boards, select boards, early childhood organizations and parent teacher groups who have voted to join the Alliance since January 15th, with more votes due in the next few weeks.

The Alliance advocates for the importance of rural community public schools **and** for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future.

There are four major points we want to make today:

1. We **support the creation of a new sub-committee** of the Commission on the Future of Public Education that is **geographically diverse and includes strong representation from rural communities**;
2. We **urge continued use of the supervisory union governance model**, especially in rural areas
3. We **want any recommendations and decisions—including those related to class, school and district size—to be grounded in research and data that are relevant to Vermont's size, geography and democratic traditions**; and
4. We ask that **total school enrollments divided by the number of core classroom teachers be used to meet target class sizes**.

Here are details in support of our major points.

1. **WE SUPPORT THE CREATION OF A NEW SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION.**

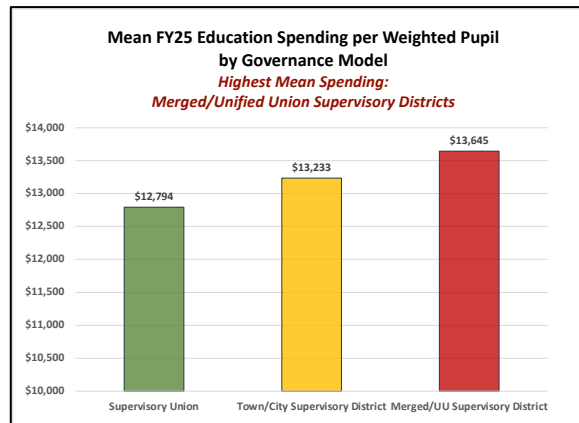
Recommendations:

Ensure sub-committee membership reflects Vermont's rural nature.

Education governance models should reflect Vermont's predominantly rural character. Vermont is designated as a rural state with nearly two-thirds of its residents living in rural areas. Vermont averages 68 people per square mile. However, population density varies significantly between rural towns and cities. Town size, population density and geographic travel challenges must be considered. Therefore, sub-committee membership should include individuals with firsthand experience in both supervisory districts and supervisory unions, representing a range of district sizes and geographic regions.

Require that the sub-committee conduct a thorough analysis of the current Vermont school governance landscape.

- The sub-committee should first conduct a comprehensive analysis of population density, geographic barriers, current district and supervisory union configurations, and existing operational cost and service data before proposing any structural changes.
- Analysis of Vermont-specific data from the Agency of Education indicates that supervisory unions are more cost-effective than consolidated supervisory district models (see chart.) Before committing to further expansion of the supervisory district model, review the research.



Expand membership of the new sub-committee to nine rather than the five proposed.

The current proposal only includes superintendents and business managers. While we support the requirement to include one or more superintendents from supervisory unions, there is value in including other perspectives; for example, from school board members, student services directors, directors of curriculum, nutrition services directors, and school principals.

Maintain a clear goal of serving Vermont’s children and youth by strengthening vibrant schools and thriving communities.

Clear and achievable goals for the improvement of equitable and accessible education across Vermont should be established *prior* to consideration of number and type of districts, supervisory unions, and other collaborative structures.

- Elementary schools are a fundamental element to a thriving community. Communities with high-quality and equitable elementary schools, childcare, preschool programs, afterschool programs and summer programs serve as community hubs and economic drivers.
- Educators, community members, school board members, and youth need to be part of the conversation to develop robust and practical regional plans for secondary education that bring together existing schools, communities, and career technical centers.

Prioritize cost and quality over scale.

The effectiveness of supervisory services—whether in supervisory unions (SUs) or supervisory districts (SDs)—should be evaluated based on cost and quality per student, not solely on scale.

- Vermont data does not support the assumption that larger scale automatically improves cost efficiency or educational quality.
- Given the unique rural realities of the state, scale must be assessed with an emphasis on measurable cost and quality outcomes, rather than arbitrary size benchmarks.
- Just as school performance is judged by cost and quality rather than sheer enrollment numbers, the same principle should apply to governance structures.

Account for transition costs.

Along with analysis of current conditions, the financial implications of a transition to differently-configured and/or larger educational units must be carefully assessed. A thoughtful, Vermont-specific, data-driven approach is essential to preserving the quality and sustainability of Vermont’s public education system.

- Any redistricting recommendations should include a detailed estimate of transition costs associated with restructuring existing governance models.
- Without careful financial planning, education restructuring could inadvertently increase costs rather than improve efficiency.

Ensure that the sub-committee grounds its proposal(s) in accurate, up-to-date information about Vermont schools, districts, and supervisory structures.

The Vermont Center for Geographic Information will be a critical resource for the sub-committee, along with its new “Vermont School Explorer” mapping tool. Before the committee begins its work, data embedded in this tool must be validated to ensure that Vermont’s current school and governance landscape is accurately represented.

2. WE URGE CONTINUED USE OF THE SUPERVISORY UNION GOVERNANCE MODEL.

Recommendations:

Understand and respect the difference between multi-town supervisory districts and supervisory unions. Many **supervisory districts (SDs)** are made up of formerly independent town school districts, in which local school boards have been dissolved and new boards representing the member towns have been created. While such unified supervisory districts may be appropriate in some regions, in more rural areas these structures aren’t practical to operate, given large geographic distances and sparse population. Further, as noted above, such merged SDs are on average more costly to operate than other models.

In contrast, a **supervisory union (SU)** is made up of school districts that retain town school boards or small clusters of towns with a joint school board. Locally elected school boards collaborate to achieve cost reductions and efficiencies in service. The SU model provides a balance between the financial benefits of shared and collaborative services and the community-centered benefits of local and responsive school boards. Vermont’s diverse geography and population distribution require a nuanced approach and all models should be on the table. Some districts face extreme geographic and population density challenges, making consolidation impractical and counterproductive.

Minimize community disruption by respecting democratic processes and local knowledge. If new governance models are indicated, local education leaders and communities should be empowered to explore potential restructuring that aligns with evidenced-based cost efficiency and educational quality. Evaluation of new structures should not be a one-size-fits-all process.

- Districts must be able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of larger structures—whether as SDs or SUs—without immediate disruption to their existing governance. This approach preserves stability while allowing communities to make informed decisions about potential consolidation or restructuring.
- Local districts, with authentic community input, should be allowed to reimagine supervisory union and school district models in ways that reflect their specific needs while maintaining a balance between collaborative efficiency and local responsiveness.

Preserve local governance.

Participatory democracy is not just a valued tradition in rural Vermont—it is a functional and effective system that enhances public education. Maintaining local governance structures helps ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of Vermont’s diverse communities. Any changes to school district governance must be guided by the democratic process and the practical needs of rural areas.

- Rural school boards play a vital role in supporting schools, solving problems, and ensuring local effectiveness. As members of supervisory union boards, these local boards collaborate as equals, prioritizing the best interests of all students within the union. Their relational trust and cooperative approach foster efficiency without sacrificing local oversight.
- Rural school boards provide significant value at minimal cost, striking a necessary balance between regional efficiency and local responsiveness.

Use formal and informal cooperative agreements within and across supervisory unions to achieve greater cost-savings, efficiencies and quality. Rather than requiring further consolidation, prime areas to explore cost savings are in technology and software; locally sourced nutrition services

that include buying from local farmers; and fiscal services of business managers such as payroll. These offer the potential to increase cost savings, efficiencies and quality while maintaining democratic processes through local districts and school boards.

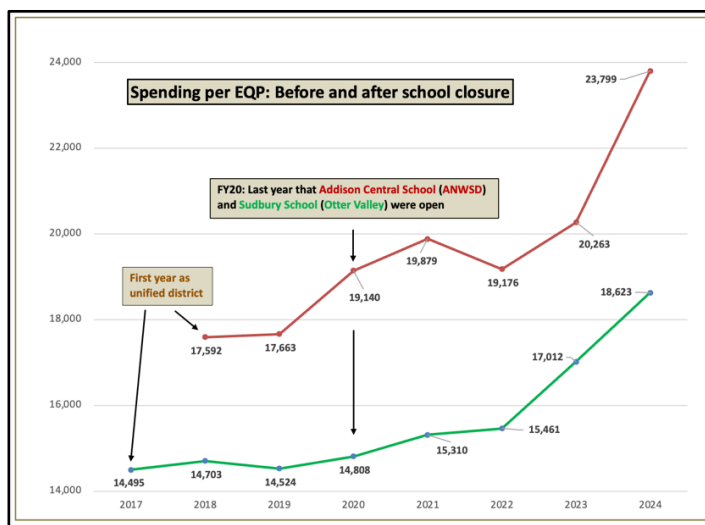
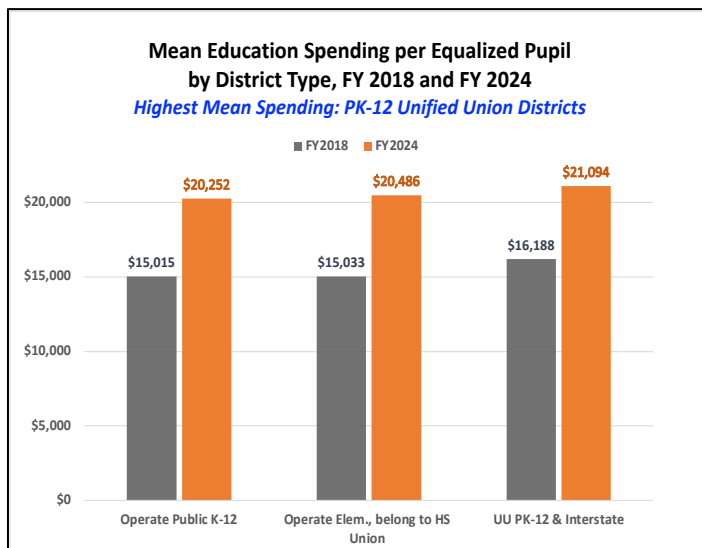
3. MAKE ANY RECOMMENDATIONS AND DECISIONS—INCLUDING THOSE RELATED TO CLASS, SCHOOL AND DISTRICT SIZE—BASED ON RESEARCH AND DATA THAT ARE RELEVANT TO VERMONT’S SIZE, GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS.

Recommendations:

Use Vermont-specific data and learn from local successes. A recent report from University of Vermont Professor Daniella Hall Sutherland states: “There is over 100 years of research on the outcomes of school and district consolidation, yet there is no empirical consensus that consolidation results in reduced educational costs in rural areas (Howley et al., 2011). In Vermont, where 71% of our schools are rural, this research should not be taken lightly. In rural contexts, projected savings are offset by increased transportation costs (Collins, 2019; Killeen & Sipple, 2000), staff salaries (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012), and infrastructure needs (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007).”

By analyzing Vermont Agency of Education data, Dr. Jeanne Albert of Lincoln has made these observations:

- At the supervisory union and school district level, merged multi-town school districts spend more per weighted pupil than multi-town supervisory unions or single-town school districts (chart displayed above);
- At the K-12 district level, merged multi-town school districts that operate K-12 spend more per equalized pupil than school districts that operate elementary schools and belong to a high school union, and those merged districts spend more per equalized pupil than single-town districts operating K-12 (chart at left, below); and
- after closing a school after a merger of town school districts, the district spending per equalized pupil (EQP) continued to rise (chart at right, below.)



Provide guidelines, not mandates, for classroom, school and district size. Young children should be educated close to home.

- **Encourage multi-agency, community and school district collaboration** to ensure childcare, preschool, afterschool and summer programs are coordinated and enhance early learning systems. Community hubs drive economic development, and already exist in some communities, illustrating their potential around the state.

- **Support schools facing enrollment decline.** The AOE should provide resources to districts exploring responses to enrollment decline in schools of all sizes. A multiage philosophy has historically been the approach of many small Vermont schools; it is both developmentally appropriate for young children and can be an effective strategy. The AOE, supported by Vermont practitioners with experience in multiage settings, could provide technical assistance to implement multiage classrooms. A number of other strategies are available; the sister school strategy being implemented in Orleans Central Supervisory Union is an example.
- **Class size targets control staffing.** Applied to schools of all sizes, recommended minimum and maximum class size targets can be used to adjust staffing in Vermont elementary schools. Flexibility is key to making staffing decisions which are effective for children. We recommend you use full school and multi-year averages in elementary schools. For predictability and stability, calculate using the total school enrollment divided by the number of core classroom teachers. Further, since enrollment naturally fluctuates year to year, three-year rolling averages rather than single-year averages produce a more consistent picture of school enrollment.
- **Support communities with unsustainable class sizes.** School communities must investigate new options when enrollment reaches unsustainable levels. Proactive planning should be encouraged. Declining enrollment consistently below class size targets should initiate facilitation support from the Agency of Education to develop Education Sustainability Plans. The planning should explore alternative grade configurations and collaboration with neighbors; and repurposing options such as childcare and preschool. Developed with community involvement, and approved by the local school board and a community vote, this approach could help communities be proactive.
- **Secondary students may benefit from larger regional schools.** Viable PK-8 settings offer sustainable programs for students around Vermont, as do specific middle school and 7-12 programs. Regional Technical Centers play an important role in preparing students for their future. In geographically isolated areas without comprehensive regional high schools, PK-12 schools can harness the power of community and provide excellent individualized learning experiences. Older students tend to be able to travel longer distances, are ready developmentally to thrive amidst larger peer groups, and can take advantage of increased program choices and expanded extracurricular activities in larger regional schools.
- **Convene regional conversations regarding secondary education to develop regional plans.** Each region should convene educators, community members, school board members and youth to develop a robust and practical regional plan for secondary education between existing schools, communities and career technical centers. Innovative regional opportunities include using smaller facilities as specialist academies in areas like the arts or sciences. With technical assistance from the AOE the new plan should be adopted by school boards and voted on by communities in the region.
- **Consider grade-level cohorts at the secondary level, rather than minimum school sizes.** As with younger students, class size requirements at secondary grades can support reorganization. For example, secondary grade cohorts of 5 sections of 20 students would create grade level groups of 100 students and result in middle schools of 200-300 students, schools of 600 plus in 7/12 facilities or 400 plus in 9/12 settings. We recommend that legislators hear testimony from experienced educators at the secondary level from more rural areas to help inform these complex decisions. Final decisions should allow for regional flexibility based on current operation patterns of 7-12 or 9-12.
- **Consider SDs and SUs of fewer than 4000 students.** The number 4000 cited in H.454 is not based on Vermont data, and any district size should be analyzed in a regional context. Larger-sized units are unlikely to decrease costs, increase efficiencies, or improve educational quality in the more rural areas of the state. Evidence suggests that some Supervisory Unions are already at optimal size for quality education with efficiencies; for example, North Country Supervisory Union and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. In other cases, smaller SUs are operating at equivalent efficiency. Such SUs should be exempted from restructuring.

- **Maintain flexibility for non-operating school districts.**

Vermont's low-population regions include many communities that do not operate their own schools due to past closures. Families in these areas often travel long distances for their children's education, with their options influenced by employment, transportation, and regional access.

- School closures in neighboring communities could significantly increase travel burdens for families in non-operating districts.
- Vermont must carefully assess the risk of creating education deserts before making decisions that could impact non-operating communities.
- Non-operating districts should retain the flexibility of school choice for their students within the parameters defined by the state.
- Interstate exemptions should be included to accommodate students who may need to attend schools across state lines due to geographic constraints.

In all cases, **we urge you to exercise caution when considering additional mergers and consolidations** affecting class, school and district size. Some are suggesting that Vermont's education system is broken. We respectfully assert that it is Vermont's funding system that is broken—not Vermont's education system. While there can certainly be improvements, large-scale changes to governance structures while also making changes to the funding model, directly after a global pandemic and in the wake of federal disruptions and uncertainty, is not the answer and could further destabilize our education system.

References

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Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2007). Does school district consolidation cut costs? *Education Finance and Policy*, 2(4), 341-375.

Fairman, J. & Donis-Keller, C. (2012). School district reorganization in Maine: Lessons learned for policy and process. *Maine Policy Review* (21)2, 24 – 40.

Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011). Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the Research Says and What It Means. National education policy center.

Killeen, K., & Sipple, J. (2000). School consolidation and transportation policy: An empirical and institutional analysis. Rural School and Community Trust.

Sutherland, D. H. (2025). The five district problem: A research and policy brief for the Governor's Transformative Education School Governance Plan. University of Vermont.

The VERMONT RURAL SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ALLIANCE. 3/25/25

Currently we have 82 voting entities representing 74 towns who have voted on membership with a further 28 exploring membership.

School Districts, Supervisory Unions – [votes taken]

- Marlboro School District
- Peacham School District
- Craftsbury School District
- Cabot School District
- Lincoln School District
- Canaan School District
- Ludlow and Mt. Holly Unified Union School District

Mountain Views Supervisory Union - [SD vote taken]

- Barnard Academy
- Killington Elementary
- Reading Elementary
- The Prosper Valley School [Pomfret Bridgewater]
- Woodstock Elementary School
- Woodstock Union Middle and High school

Windham Southeast Supervisory District and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union [SD and SU votes taken]

- Dummerston
- Brattleboro
- Putney
- Guilford
- Vernon [4/14]

Windham Northeast Supervisory Union [SU vote, individual votes taken]

- Westminster School District
- Athens Grafton School District
- Rockingham School Board
- Bellows Falls Union High School Board

Orleans Central Supervisory Union: Orleans Central Elementary District [vote taken]

- Barton
- Glover
- Irasburg
- Brownington
- Orleans
- Albany

White River Valley Supervisory Union: [SU vote, individual votes taken]

- Strafford School District voted
- Rochester Stockbridge School District voted
- Granville Hancock Union District voted
- Sharon School District

- First Branch School District Chelsea Tunbridge
- White River Unified District Bethel South Royalton

North Country Supervisory Union: [SU vote followed by individual votes in process]

- Lowell School District voted
- Coventry School District voted
- Brighton School District voted
- Charleston School District vote
- Derby School District
- Holland School District voted
- Jay Westfield School District voted
- Newport School District voted
- Troy School District voted
- NCUHS District voted
- NCUMS District voted
- NCSU Executive Board voted

NEK Choice District [vote taken]

- Bloomfield
- Norton
- Brunswick
- East Haven
- Granby
- Guildhall
- Kirby
- Lemington
- Maidstone
- Norton
- Victory

Wells Spring UU District [voted]

- Middletown Springs
- Wells

Grand Isle Supervisory Union [SU vote taken followed by individual votes in process]

- South Hero voted
- Grand Isle CJUUSD voted
- North Hero CIUUSD voted
- Isle LaMotte CISUUD voted
- Alburgh voted

Lamoille South Supervisory Union

- Elmore
- Morrisville

Municipal Support [votes taken]

- Town of Greensboro Select Board

- Town of Peacham Select Board
- Town of Barnard Select Board
- Town of Ripton Select Board
- Town of Troy Select Board
- Town of Westminster Select Board
- Town of Dummerston Select Board
- Marlboro School Association
- Peacham Parent Teacher Group
- Franklin Community School Foundation LTD
- Windham County Head Start /Early Head Start program