

Elaine Collins
NCSU Superintendent of Schools
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Hello,

For the record, I am Elaine Collins, the superintendent for North Country Supervisory Union. This is my third year as superintendent, my 14th as a school administrator, and my 35th working in Vermont schools. Thank you for all your work this legislative session. I'm sure it's been extraordinarily challenging and has been a thankless endeavor. As someone who calls snow days for a large geographical region, I understand that sometimes no matter the decision, it is the wrong one and can appreciate that you are in a difficult position.

The SU that I have led for three years and worked in for the last nine years, North Country Supervisory Union, is currently the largest geographical supervisory union in the state. We have 12 operating educational sites as well as two non-operating districts and have a comprehensive PreK – 12 system that serves approximately 2700 students. We reach 65 miles from one end to another and have about 520 square miles in between. If I travel from Jay-Westfield Elementary School to Brighton Elementary School, which I've had an occasion to do, it takes me approximately 1 hour and 6 minutes to do so with clear roads and no weather.

You've heard me speak many times about our supervisory union structure – or our central office – being a force magnifier. The following chart outlines what makes up the composition of our \$22.8 million budget. As you can also see from the chart, of the \$22.8 million budget which includes 166.2 FTEs, only \$8.8 million is assessed back to schools. This seems like a really good return on investment.

NCSU Central Office Budget
FY26

DEPARTMENT	FTEs	GRANTS**	CARRY FORWARD	ASSESSED TO SCHOOLS	BOOKKEEPING CONTRACTS	TOTAL COST
General Assessment						
Superintendent	5.5					
Education Technology	5.0					
Human Resources	3.0					
Business Dept	8.5					
Learning Design	10.9					
School Nurse Leader	1.0					
TOTAL GENERAL ASSESSMENT:	33.9	\$2,988,041.00		\$2,935,332.00	\$551,874.00	\$6,475,247.00
Early Childhood Services Assessment						
Coordinator	1.0					
Coach	1.0					
ECSE Special Educators	6.2					
SLP-A	2.0					
Paraprofessionals	10.0					
TOTAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES ASSESSMENT:	20.2	\$872,251.00	\$225,000.00	\$643,986.00		\$1,741,237.00
Special Services Assessment						
Administrative Office	4.0					
Special Educators	44.2					
Virtual Case Managers	12.5					
Supports (Neuro, Eval., Behavior, SLP, Instructional)	23.5					
Drivers	7.2					
TOTAL SPECIAL SERVICES ASSESSMENT:	91.4	\$7,167,109.00	\$1,460,000.00	\$4,561,950.00	\$0.00	\$13,189,059.00
Encore Program						
Encore Program Coordinator	1.0					
Program Employees (Roughly 200 Part Time Employees)	17.0					
TOTAL ENCORE PROGRAM:	18.0	\$646,410.00		\$178,600.00		\$825,010.00
Community Schools Program						
Director	1					
Liaisons	1.7					
TOTAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS PROGRAM:	2.7	\$575,178.00				\$575,178.00
FUNDING TOTALS:	166.2	\$12,248,989.00	\$1,685,000.00	\$8,319,868.00	\$551,874.00	\$22,805,731.00
**these are estimated costs as grant allocations vary from year to year.						

There's been a lot of talk about central office staff and the inefficiencies of having repeated services across relatively small areas. When I was an elementary school principal, I vacillated between appreciating the services that we received from central office, and dreading how much the assessment was going to be from year to year. When I was a principal of a small school, aside from the occasional call to the superintendent for a personnel or student issue, I saw central office as more of an assessment than an asset. However, when I changed jobs and went to North Country Supervisory Union as the principal of Newport City Elementary School, following 6 principals in 5 years, I quickly learned how valuable NCSU's central office was. Newport City had about 350 – 375 students and because the school had been through so many principals in such a short time, systems had fallen apart. We needed support from central office with more special education teachers, a dedicated full-time behavior specialist, a dedicated full-time behavior team assistant, more support from the neurodevelopmental team,

support from instructional coaches, and support for technology. As a former middle school teacher, managing a preschool wasn't even close to my area of expertise, and I needed to call on our early childhood coordinator to give me advice about how preschool should be run as it was housed in the elementary school. We had a robust afterschool program, and thankfully I didn't have to do a whole lot with that, with the help of the coordinator of ENCORE. With so many big behaviors in the building, I had to rely on the director of special services to help me determine best next steps for some of the more complicated students in our school. And I had John Castle on speed dial. The number of personnel difficulties, serious student issues, and parental complications required me to call John at least two times a week, sometimes more. Central office was most certainly an asset, and crucial to my work. Our work couldn't be done by us alone. We needed help and central office provided essential services and supports for our school.

Now as a superintendent, I truly see school principals as the linchpins of the work, and central office is in existence to serve principals. Aside from teacher expertise, having building leaders that teachers trust is the second-most important factor in student success. I'm going to say that again: teacher-principal trust is the second most important factor in student outcomes. For principals to be effective at their work and to be leaders that teachers will trust, they need a direct supervisor who knows them, knows their work, and can answer their immediate and pressing questions without delay. On any given day, I get 4 – 10 calls from principals. In the last two weeks, I've gotten several higher-level calls:

- *A weapons violation at the JHS;
- *An online threat from a hacker at the JHS saying they were going to "shoot up" the school;
- *Accusations from two separate schools that teachers had put their hands on students;
- *A police raid on an apartment building across the road from a school at 6:38 am, while buses were on the road picking up students and staff were showing up at work;
- *Seven separate calls from parents who were upset about decisions that principals had made; and
- *Ten student disciplinary issues requiring student hearings with the board.

In a mega-district, who takes those calls?

We currently have about 2,700 students. The newest proposed legislation proposes 4,000 students. If we make NCSU bigger still, I'm not sure that I have the capacity to do anything more than I'm currently doing. This year, I have an assistant superintendent, thank God. In the year we have seen PCBs in the high school and educating 720 students in tents, a principal who left in October in one of our schools requiring at least one day a week on site for both the assistant superintendent and me, at least 20 student hearings, and negotiating both support staff and certified staff contracts – I simply wouldn't have made it without help. With another 1300 students, and presumably more schools, we would need more assistant superintendents – and likely more folks in central office to manage the financial systems, personnel, special education, early childhood, technology, and curriculum.

I would agree that there are inefficiencies with too few students. I also see potential inefficiencies with too many.

As the superintendent, one of my biggest goals, aside from supporting principals in their work, is to shepherd our leadership team in the balance of freedom and unity. We love freedom and unity in our SU, but what that really means is that everyone loves freedom. Unity? Not so much. However, the only way for our students, who will feed into our high school, to achieve their greatest academic achievement is to have a system that has teachers who teach cohesive curricula, employ best practices, and can respond to student need by adjusting their instruction. We have had the same math curriculum for several years. This year is year 0 for implementation of a district-wide language arts curriculum. Next is thinking about how we implement Tier I instruction for functional skills and determining a common database for keeping track of behavior data.

When we think about how we implement large-scale change in our supervisory union, it is imperative that we have investment and buy-in by teachers. For example, our literacy program wasn't just chosen and given to teachers. Literacy leaders had two programs that we evaluated for effectiveness and then asked teachers to pilot units and provide feedback on the programs. A group of literacy leaders evaluated the feedback and voted on which program we would implement. Without this process, central office leaders can say that we will implement a literacy program, but the implementation would be lackluster and would lack fidelity, resulting in lackluster results for our students.

I'm telling you all these things about big system changes because change is complex and requires leaders who are respected and trusted to implement them with fidelity. It requires buy-in and constant monitoring to make sure that the change is going as anticipated, and it requires tweaks and refinement when the change isn't going as anticipated. If we have super-sized districts or supervisory unions, I am worried that substantive positive change will be nigh unto impossible to achieve. Saying we will do a thing, and making sure that the thing happens, are two very different realities.

Last week, we held our annual Full Board meeting at NCSU. There were 30 board members and approximately 20 district leaders present to reorganize and share in the work of NCSU. Each of the board members are elected by the electorate of their individual towns to represent that town's interest at the SU level. I am worried with a new system of "professional" board members that we will lose the connection to our local electorate and the local community. I would agree that my current 17 board meetings a month isn't efficient, and likely not sustainable. However, I think it's possible to retain a supervisory union structure, with elected board members who are tied to their local towns, who meet as a board to do the work of the SU. Should they meet one time a month? Twice? I don't know all the details. However, without someone who understands the community they are representing, the voice of that town is lost. The voice of the community is lost. The voice for the students is lost. In that system, closing schools and making merger decisions becomes easier at the board level, but

doesn't land any easier on the students who are in those schools, nor in the towns who are decimated without a voice in the process.

Something that has been missing up to now, in my humble opinion, is listening to the field. There are a lot of people who are coming up with ideas about how to fix our educational system, and many of those people have never worked in a school, ran a school or been in charge of a district. Imagine if someone who had had those experiences had brought you a plan at the beginning of this legislative session. Instead of taking until mid-March to decide to strike out all of the plan, perhaps there would be parts of that plan that would still be on the table and we would be making plans for how best to improve our system. Assigning duties to the Commission to provide input about what to do next is a good first step, as long as there are rural district representatives on that group.

In Morgan and Holland, our communities voted to close their small schools and send their elementary students to Derby Elementary School. This makes for a very long day for some of our very young students, who travel about 90 minutes one way to school every day. It sounds good from afar to say let's close schools and consolidate, until the reality of really young students on the bus for 3 hours a day hits closer to home. That's why it's important to make sure that our rural contexts are heard in these conversations. The devil is in the details, and only people who live and serve in the rural context can tell you about the details and how they might affect students.

Earlier this year, I provided testimony to this committee about PCBs. During that testimony, I cautioned this committee about making large-scale changes without asking for input from the field. When we make large-scale change without thinking about how that will affect the field, we are likely going to cause some unintended consequences and major disruption, which will be challenging to navigate. I would encourage you to work with the field to determine what changes make sense. We want change and need to be able to make education finance more sustainable for our state. Let's be careful that we don't move so quickly that we end up creating more harm than good. And let's make sure that whatever we do, it passes the common sense litmus test.