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Mount Abraham Unified School District
72 Munsill Avenue, Building 6, Suite 601, Bristol, VT 05443
Phone: (802) 453-3657 * www.mausd.org * Fax: (802) 453-2029

Shaping Our Future Together

Submitted to: VT House Education Committee
From: Patrick J. Reen, Superintendent, Mount Abraham Unified School District
Subject: Testimony on School Size
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Improving Equity, Opportunity and Affordability

School size is one of the most impactful factors in delivering equitable, high-quality educational opportunities for students in a cost-effective manner. Legislation that does not address school size will miss much of the opportunity we have before us to find cost savings in a way that can improve equity and opportunity for students.

Secondary Schools

- Secondary schools should be large enough to offer a broad range of course offerings while maintaining class sizes that are cost-effective.
 - Current Challenge
 - With a projected enrollment of approximately 375 high school students and 180 middle school students Mt. Abraham is not a small secondary school by Vermont standards. That said, while we are proud of the breadth of our course offerings, they are less than the offerings provided by larger schools.
 - With declining enrollment and increasing cost pressures, each budget cycle we risk losing more and more of these courses. For example, in FY26 we are phasing out middle-level word language.
 - Maintaining a breadth of offerings requires us to run courses with low enrollment, sometimes fewer than ten students.
 - The result is the average class size in grades 7-12 at Mt. Abraham is smaller than the average class size in our elementary schools.
 - Presently this small class size can significantly impact our cost per pupil and therefore our tax rate.
 - Possible Opportunity

- Create a vision for future-focused high-quality secondary education that every secondary school in Vermont is expected to provide.
- Determine the minimum number of students needed to efficiently populate secondary schools that provide this level of education.
- Legislate the consolidation of secondary schools to achieve the scale needed to provide the type of education we want for our students.
- Include school construction aid where needed to create buildings large enough and with a layout to support the vision for future-focused high-quality secondary education.

Elementary Schools

- Elementary schools should be large enough that grade configurations are stable year to year and are intentionally chosen to provide high-quality instruction, not forced upon schools due to enrollment variability.
 - Current Challenge
 - Two small schools in my district enrolling 75-116 students over the past five years each have had four different grade configurations in that time.
 - The current second grade of one of these schools is a class of 8 with seven girls and one boy.
 - Teachers have expressed concern about teaching math to students when two grades are combined (e.g. all 5th and 6th graders in a school are in the same class and there is no other 5/6 classroom).
 - It is difficult for one person to be an expert in literacy, math, science, and social studies curriculum and pedagogy as well as understand the range of developmental and social and emotional needs of students for multiple grade levels in the same classroom.
 - I have had classroom teachers leave the profession citing an unmanageable workload.
 - Possible Opportunity
 - Create a vision for future-focused high-quality elementary education that every elementary school in Vermont is expected to provide.
 - Consider the number of students in a grade when considering school size. When there are enough students in a school to have at least two classrooms per grade level schools can choose to:
 - Have straight grade OR multi-age configurations
 - Have teachers departmentalize OR teach all subjects
 - Mix students to support productive learning environments
 - Create regular opportunities for teachers of the same grade and subjects to collaborate on curriculum, instruction and assessment

- The opportunity to improve the quality of instruction to students while reducing the workload of teachers all while saving money for taxpayers should be given serious consideration.
 - Larger schools are less subjected to yearly fluctuation in grade configuration creating greater predictability for students, teachers and families/caregivers.
- Elementary schools should be large enough to sustain consistent access to resources to support students and families.
 - Current Challenge
 - When small schools can't sustain full-time positions such as nurses, counselors, school-based clinicians, interventionists, special educators, building principals, etc. there can be large portions of the week where students don't have access to expert support provided by these positions. As a result, others in the school often need to fill in to the best of their ability, which takes them away from other responsibilities and understandably lacks the expertise of the staff member trained in that field.
 - Many part-time positions often result in "rounding up" of FTEs which increases cost.
 - Intervention groups in small schools are often either smaller than we would want them to be (often 1 or 2 students in MAUSD) or are more appropriately sized (4-5) but have a wide range of needs making it difficult to target the specific needs of each student. It often feels like we need to choose between interventions that are ineffective or inefficient.
 - Possible Opportunity
 - Larger schools require fewer part-time or very part-time positions increasing student access to essential support services and reducing the need to pull others away from their important responsibilities.
 - Fewer part-time positions likely reduces the "rounding up" effect.
 - More students in a grade level could increase the number of students who can access intervention while maintaining FTEs of interventionists.
- Elementary schools should have enough students to fully occupy the building they are in.
 - Current Challenge
 - Each of the five schools in my district are operating well under their capacity for students (we could fit all students into two of the five buildings without an addition to a facility).
 - Whether fully enrolled or significantly under enrolled the entire building still needs to be heated, cleaned, parking lots plowed, lights on,

playgrounds updated, lawns mowed, windows replaced, roof replaced, kitchen equipment maintained, etc.

- In a cost-per-pupil funding environment a new stove in a school operating at 50% capacity costs twice as much per pupil as a new stove in a school operating at 100% capacity.
 - Repairing and maintaining buildings that are not necessary for the number of students we serve presently impacts our cost per pupil and the resulting tax rate. In the future this could take valuable foundation formula dollars away from serving students.
- Possible Opportunity
- Legislative action to determine the number of schools we should operate will direct more education fund dollars directly to programs and support for students.
 - Some schools may need to be smaller than desired due to geographic isolation. Defining small by necessity is essential.
 - School construction aid will be important to support work needed to reduce the number of schools.
 - Towns who lose a school should receive State support to study alternative uses for the facility