

Testimony
Lisa McCarthy
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Good afternoon and thank you for having me here today to speak on behalf of schools in rural Vermont. My name is Lisa McCarthy and I am the principal of Craftsbury Schools. Craftsbury is a preK-12 district located in Orleans county. We are a member of the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union which encompasses the towns of Craftsbury, Wolcott, Hardwick, Greensboro, Stannard and Woodbury.

Craftsbury is a town and community that deeply values education and the importance of local democracy and local decision-making. There has been tremendous support for our preK-12 school system historically and this is true today. We currently stand out in our region as a school that has a stable school population. We are not declining in enrollment like many other schools in Vermont.

We are a school with a community school mindset. We have over 25 active community partners, not including family volunteers, who we engage with on a daily basis. One example of this is our connection with the Freedom and Unity Town Committee. Just last week I met with this committee, which includes a high school student representative, to plan our Mock Town Meeting experience for students in grades 3, 4 and 5. This event is an experiential learning opportunity and not only is an example of our work with our community partner, but is an important component of the educational experience in Craftsbury that teaches students about civics, the importance of local democracy and the ability to have a voice in decision-making within their community. The connection we have fostered between community and school provides not only increased educational opportunities for our students, but also creates the groundwork for a robust and thriving rural town.

In Craftsbury, our school board, administration and community members are not afraid to engage in the hard work of local democracy to have the tough conversations needed in regards to balancing educational priorities and fiscal responsibility. This current budget season, our original draft budget had a projected 12% total increase and .39 cent increase on the tax rate. The Secretary, Zoie Saunders, recently called on school boards to engage in the tough work of maintaining fiscal responsibility and the Craftsbury board and community rose to this call. There was input, there were many conversations, there were school board meetings, and ultimately, the budget that was approved by the board reflected a 6% increase and a projected 8 cent tax rate increase, which is far below many towns in the state of Vermont this year.

I want to be clear that I am not opposed to change at the state level in regards to education. I think change needs to happen. However, I believe that ACT 73, as it was originally presented in the last legislative session, has impacts that disproportionately impact rural schools and communities. While it is an education reform bill, I have no doubt that when small, rural towns lose their community school the community as a whole is negatively impacted. Roxbury is a prime example. As a native Vermonter and somebody who moved back from out-of-state to start

a family, I can attest that in choosing a town where I would raise my children, the school and the ability to be involved in a small, local, public school was a priority for me. I would not have bought a house in a town where I would then have to put my 5 year old child on a long bus ride.

When I shared about the Craftsbury budget previously, I did this to demonstrate the power of local democracy. What I didn't share is that I believe we can all do better than a 6% increase in the future. This is where we need your help. This budget the board approved had a reduction in 1.5 FTE staff members, but still rose 6% due to increases largely outside our control. Health insurance, transportation, and special education costs continue to rise and impact our ability to be able to maintain a lower percentage increase. I strongly feel that exploring a Centralized Educational Service Areas model to consolidate and control these costs and services is a solid next step in the process of controlling the cost of education.

Next Friday, January 30th, Craftsbury Schools will be bringing 28 middle and high school students to the statehouse for Rural Schools Day. I invite you to visit with them and learn about how we create diverse and high quality instructional programming so that our small school can provide students with big opportunities. We currently have 9 AP course options at the high school level and students engaging in flexible pathways through dual enrollment, early college, work-based learning, attending the tech center, virtual learning and other creative learning opportunities. We are a small school and we also provide robust, rigorous instructional programming in a close knit and very supportive community. Thank you for your time.