

Dr. Michael Lechliter, Superintendent

Lisa Estler, Director of Operations & Finance

Shannon Lessley, Director of Curriculum & Technology

Jon Berliner, Director of Special Education &  
Student Support Services

**Vermont House Education Committee  
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***Testimony Presented by  
Michael G Lechliter, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools  
Harwood Unified Union School District***

Chair Conlon and members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Mike Lechliter. I serve as Superintendent of the Harwood Unified Union School District in Washington County, and I am here on behalf of the Vermont Superintendents Association.

By way of background, this is my 35th year in public education. In a previous superintendency, I led our school team through the full-scale renovation of three elementary schools ranging in size from 350 to 700 students, construction of a new elementary school with a capacity of 750 students, and a three-year phased reconstruction of a grades 9–12 high school with a capacity of 2100 students. That experience, along with the work I have been charged to do in Harwood related to construction planning, shapes the perspective I bring to you today.

I want to speak to a simple but critical point. Education transformation and school construction aid must be linked. They cannot be separate policy conversations.

Act 73 took an important step by establishing the School Construction Aid Special Fund, but the statute makes clear that the fund is financed only through amounts transferred or appropriated by the General Assembly, plus interest. In other words, creating the fund does not, by itself, create a reliable revenue stream for construction aid.

Therefore, if the Legislature expects districts to pursue transformation toward a future state, it must also begin budgeting real dollars into the School Construction Aid Special Fund each year so that there is a predictable, credible pathway for school construction and modernization that matches the policy goals. The Joint Fiscal

Office fiscal note associated with Act 73 also noted that while the School Construction Aid Special Fund and related structures were established, the act itself did not include an appropriation or transfer of funds to capitalize it.

It is worth noting that Vermont has successfully used state incentives to support structural transformation in the past. In the 1990s, when the state offered incentive funding, the Waterbury and Duxbury districts which are now part of my current school district chose to merge. One of the precipitating factors was the condition of the old Duxbury Elementary School, which was in poor shape and facing significant infrastructure needs. Rather than continue investing in an aging building that no longer met educational needs, the communities made a difficult but forward looking decision.

With state partnership covering roughly half of the construction cost, Crossett Brook Middle School was built in Duxbury as a 5–8 school. Duxbury Elementary was closed, and what is now Brookside Primary in Waterbury was repurposed into a K–4 building serving Waterbury and Duxbury. That was real transformation. It required courage locally, but it was made possible because the state aligned policy and financial incentives. Our current vice chair, Cindy Senning, served on the Waterbury–Duxbury School Board at that time, which was chaired by current Rep. Theresa Wood. That history demonstrates that when the state provides meaningful financial partnership, communities are capable of embracing structural change.

In Harwood today, we recently completed a comprehensive facilities evaluation of our elementary and middle schools. The study confirms what many districts are experiencing. Our buildings are aging. Most major renovations occurred more than two decades ago. Many systems are now at or beyond their useful life. When combined with the needs at our middle and high school, the district faces capital needs that exceed \$100,000,000.

This is not about cosmetic improvements. It is about roofs, boilers, ventilation systems, accessibility compliance, fire protection, and core infrastructure. Many of our building systems are reaching the end of their life cycle, meaning replacement is not optional but unavoidable. In other cases like Brookside Primary, we are maintaining buildings originally constructed in the late 19th century.

At the same time, we have been engaged in a master planning process examining potential reconfiguration options. One important conclusion emerged. Even when schools are consolidated to create scale, meaningful long-term savings require upfront construction investment. The modeling shows that savings across reconfiguration options are tightly grouped and not dramatically different from maintaining the status quo, largely because additions or renovations are still required to serve students appropriately.

Transformation is not free. In a state experiencing enrollment decline, districts like ours cannot meaningfully reduce infrastructure without reinvesting in the facilities that remain. In HUUSD's current circumstance, that would require upgrades and, potentially, expansion so other schools could accommodate students if structural changes were ever pursued.

Vermont's education funding structure adds another layer of complexity. Local bonds have statewide tax implications because education revenue is pooled. Because bond debt is counted in per pupil spending, some

districts like HUUSD face a structural disincentive to address deferred maintenance. A reliably funded School Construction Aid Special Fund would directly mitigate that disincentive.

The Legislature does not need to solve this all at once. Addressing every capital need in a single year would be unrealistic and fiscally destabilizing. The state has already done important work in generating a report on capital needs across Vermont's schools. That work helps define the scope of the challenge and informs the future state many are envisioning.

However, establishing a phased and reliable construction aid strategy, potentially by dedicating a portion of annual surplus funds, would signal that facilities are foundational to reform rather than an afterthought. Paired with a transparent statewide method to prioritize projects over time, this would allow Vermont to move steadily toward that future state without overwhelming taxpayers or destabilizing local budgets.

Our master planning work reinforces this conclusion. Regardless of the configuration selected, updating facilities remains a sound investment because district reconfiguration alone does not generate dramatic savings. The infrastructure still requires renewal.

If Vermont seeks a more efficient and sustainable education system, facilities must be part of the policy design.

Thank you for your time and your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.