

TO: Vermont House Education Committee

FROM: Penny Chamberlin, Superintendent of Schools
Orleans Central Supervisory Union
(Albany, Barton, Brownington, Glover, Irasburg, Orleans and Westmore)

DATE: February 20, 2025

RE: Testimony on the challenges and experiences faced in recent years related to scale

Good morning, thank you for requesting my participation in your session. I will begin by sharing information about myself and my Supervisory Union.

I hope we have time for questions from your committee membership. I appreciate being able to get to the heart of your concerns.

I am the Superintendent of the Orleans Central Supervisory union. I have served in this role for the past 4 years. I am planning to retire this June and hope to support districts in Vermont as they move forward and address concerns and challenges related to public education.

I have experience in school transformation with the Central VT Career Center moving to the Central VT Career Center District and have been able to successfully manage the school's facility and staffing crisis in OCSU over the past 4 years. I was able to bring over three decades of experience in public education to the Orleans Central Supervisory Union.

The Orleans Central Supervisory Union consists of Two Districts; Lake Region Union High School and the Lake Region Union Elementary-Middle School District. Within our SU, we have 1100 students and 300 staff; five K-8 Schools, one K-6 school, One 9-12 high school and two Pre-Schools (up to 65 students).

My focus as Superintendent in the Orleans Central SU has been to address:

- A. Staffing crises for the past 4 years
 1. We have 300 staff across our SU, over the past three years we have turned over 200+ faculty and staff. Only in the most recent year (FY25) have we seen a decline in turnover with 50 vacancies that were mostly filled.
 2. We have 31 provisionally/emergency licensed faculty, mostly within our Elem/Middle School District which has 51 core classroom teachers. That is a large percentage of new staff.
 3. With a high turnover and staffing shortage, we are also short on mentors (skilled and seasoned staff), we need additional professional development time in the school calendar and funding to support training the new staff and we spend more on mentoring and

support for the new staff over a more typical year with 15-20 staff turnover.

- a. Turnover comes from several different directions:
inexperienced staff get overwhelmed and can't continue (either they resign mid-year or at the end of their first year); lack of training prior to stepping into a classroom – causes stress and anxiety; lack of long term, adequate housing; taking courses full time to get licensed while at the same time having to teach full time and all the requirements that come with the role of Teacher; and the time it takes to become part of your community and become connected to a support system outside of school.
- B. Failing and Aging Facilities – including Glover School and Orleans School most recently.
- C. Student Enrollments are remaining steady and predicted to remain steady for the next 5-10 years with slight growth – while this is a positive for OCSU, it causes concern if consolidation happens, we will need to renovate buildings or build new structures to accommodate our students.

2. Benefits? Challenges? Shortcomings?

- a. Benefits of our sized SU is that we are able to bring teachers and students together for SU wide training, support and unique experiences. We have unique communities with a lot to offer via partnerships with our schools. We have
 - A. With the benefits of being rural, we are rural enough that it would take 45 minutes to drive from one side of our SU to the other (Albany to Brownington)
- b. Challenges with temporary school closing due to failing infrastructure and age and when a school isn't able to house its students for a period of time (weeks – months). We do not have access to appropriate spaces in our towns to house groups of children and our schools are small enough and enrollments strong enough that we are not able to accommodate one school to be combined with another under the same roof.
 - A. If we have a school (such as the Glover School, 84 students and 25 staff) that needs to be relocated, we have to spread them out across our other schools and into buildings within the community.
- c. Challenges with recommended class sizes: We have a policy with a 10-student minimum to a 20-student maximum. Most of our K-8 schools can only support 15

students in a class due to the square footage/size of the classrooms in most of our buildings.

- d. Challenges with staffing include lack of affordable housing, keeping our salaries competitive in a rural, low socio-economic region and the lack of post-secondary preparation programs to fill our staffing needs.
- e. Challenges with the rising cost of education and impacts on our local communities, they are not able to support or sustain any long-term facility upgrades due to the rising property tax increases. Our communities are dedicated to keeping all our small schools open but don't have the resources to do this currently nor long term.
- f. Challenges overall: school consolidation, lack of school construction aid, uncertainty of the state's position as it changes frequently, intensity of the Governor's Plan, etc. I support a consolidation/reconfiguration of SU's/Districts; however, we should be looking at 17-21 SU's/Districts vs 5. We need a timeline that covers 5-7 years, not 3 years. We need to keep in mind what is good for children, the current condition of our schools and how that impacts all consolidation efforts and the socio-economic status of the regions as a whole.
- g. Shortcomings – I feel that the state is trying to find efficiencies and equity to improve access and opportunities for all students. However, the planning and vision for this work is lacking.
 - A. It is lacking in addressing the school funding structure and timeline to allow for change to take place, data to be gathered over time and analysis of the change before making adjustments;
 - B. It is lacking in a vision that will support Vermont for the long term while addressing the short-term challenges that come with the phases of change;
 - C. It is lacking in transparency, inclusion, and detail that is needed for all phases of change;
 - D. It is lacking in resources at the state and district/SU level to support the wanted and needed change;
 - E. It is lacking in the funding structure and support needed to assist districts and SU's while they embrace these changes whether it be in education funding, infrastructure/facilities/construction funds, staffing and training, or governance structure guidance and support.

Thank you for your time today.