

My name is Randi Lowe and I am the superintendent for the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union which serves approximately 2200 students. We have three member districts and six schools with a range of school choice options. We have established class size parameters in our operating schools and do our best to follow them. We aim for 15-18 students in grade K-3 classrooms and 18-24 students in grade 4-8 classes. We do not operate a high school. We have successfully used attrition to decrease staffing over the past 7 years as a response to declining enrollment. However, in some schools, we are not able to meet the minimum class size, even when establishing multi-age classrooms, due to the school's enrollment numbers. With two schools of approximately 50 students across 7 elementary grades we are facing a host of challenges.

In 2022, the Taconic and Green Regional School District (T&G) began exploring the formation of a middle school. During this process, we completed facility evaluations of all T&G schools. While we have done a reasonably good job of maintaining our buildings, all schools were found to need significant short and long term financial investment to repair or update infrastructure.

During the summer of 2024, after reviewing numerous sources of data, including enrollment trends, staffing patterns, resource allocation, academic growth and performance data, and our middle school planning docs, I let the Board know that I did not believe we were being fiscally efficient and there was an educational cost to operating all five T&G elementary and K-8 schools. Declining enrollment is creating educational challenges across our system.

A few of the concerns I identified at our smaller schools include:

- ❖ Tier 1 (Classroom instruction) Challenges
 - Inability for classroom teachers to provide rigorous and robust Tier 1, classroom instruction, in multi-age classrooms
 - The solution to this problem has been to use Tier 2 interventionists, who should be providing additional instruction to students who require more targeted instruction, to teach Tier 1 instruction
 - This practice dismantles the multi-tiered system of support within the school and students who need additional small group instruction do not receive it
- ❖ Limited opportunities for students and inability to create different instructional and class configurations
- ❖ Itinerant staff
 - High staff turnover
 - Do not feel part of one school community
 - Preference to not work at multiple buildings

- ❖ Services not available
 - Part time staff in key positions: school counselor, multilingual staff, special education, nurse
 - Enrollment limits this personnel but some students need consistent services
 - Not an efficient use of financial resources to hire full time personnel when enrollment doesn't support it
- ❖ Teachers do not have colleagues to prep/plan/collaborate with

The T&G Board understood the concerns and in September and October we held 6 community forums across all T&G schools to present information, answer questions and listen to comments from the public. An estimated 700 people attended these forums, in person or virtually.

These sessions provided context for the challenges the district is facing and provided general options for reconfiguring our schools, including closing schools and creating a more stable and predictable education delivery model.

This is what we experienced and learned:

1. Community members will strongly advocate to keep their schools open
2. In every public forum, community members understood and agreed that the status quo was not an option, however, every community advocated hard for their local school not to be the one to close
3. Closing a school is a highly emotional topic for a community to discuss
4. Making fact based decisions in small communities is very difficult as perception is stronger than facts
5. Traditions and nostalgia are decision drivers

As a superintendent, I am leading our system and making difficult proposals that I do not want to make. I don't want to close schools or make significant changes to our physical plant. However, in order to prioritize educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, something needs to change.

From my perspective, school boards and superintendents need clear direction from the state regarding requirements for schools to be operational. Included in these requirements should be:

- ❖ School size minimums
- ❖ Class size minimums
- ❖ Classes/grade level guidance
- ❖ School counselor available every day
- ❖ MTSS in place with a schedule of services that ensures students who need it have access to high quality academic and/or social/emotional intervention services
- ❖ Transportation routes established that limit bus rides to 60 minutes for students through grade 5 and 75 minutes for students in grades 6-12

Schools that do not meet these requirements shall consolidate when the distance between school buildings that operate similar grade levels is 30 minutes or less. This distance allows for an additional 30 minutes of travel for students from home to school. Schools shall not be small by choice. What does small mean? This likely requires some focused planning, and construction funds to renovate existing schools in order to have capacity for additional students. I recommend a 10-15 year parallel construction aid plan to financially support the new construction costs.

Schools that are more than 30 minutes from another school that operates similar grade levels shall remain open and be provided funds to ensure quality of education is not compromised by geographic isolation.

Small schools have been an important part of Vermont's educational landscape for generations. Historically, with every state-led consolidation, we have closed schools and reorganized our operating structure. At this point, I believe further consolidation requires clear direction and expectations established at the state level. I do not think that this should be left to a new, larger, newly formed district to decide on their own.

Leaving the decisions regarding how to right size, including closing schools, without clearly directed requirements is setting a new district up to fail both its community and its students. The proposed level of change, even a change that results in half as many Supervisory Districts, will impact communities. We should expect unease, a lack of trust, skepticism and criticism. Given what I have experienced first hand, and I know I am not alone, if there is an expectation that we operate schools within minimum class sizes and/or minimum school sizes, budget using a foundation formula, and are expected to follow all state and federal requirements, I cannot overstate the importance of direction from the state level. A new district's success relies on this.