

February 20, 2025

To the Members of the House Education Committee:

Good morning, I am Steven Dellinger-Pate, the current Superintendent of Washington Central UUSD. I have just started as superintendent this school year after previously serving as the principal of U-32 in the same district for 10 years. Prior to that, I have served for 17 years in the roles of assistant superintendent, principal, director of math and technology, and my favorite, math teacher. I have worked in schools that range in size from 50 to 2000+ in rural, suburban, and urban districts, and in magnet, charter, and public schools. I have supervised schools with enrollments of over 4000 students, in a district of 32,000 students. I come to you now to offer some perspective on the challenges and experiences that I have encountered in meeting student needs in a variety of school configurations.

Our district comprises the towns of Berlin, Calais, East Montpelier, Middlesex and Worcester. We have five PreK-6 grade elementary schools, one in each town, and a union middle and high school grades 7-12. Our total enrollment for the district is 1380, which is approximately 200 students fewer than a decade ago, and is projected to drop by an additional 200 students in the next decade. Our elementary schools currently have enrollments of 73, 93, 121, 187, and 210, while the middle and high school has an enrollment of 697. Our school board, community and staff have been working together over the past year and half to determine the best possible configuration of schools and grade levels that allow us to provide the highest quality education for our students.

Challenges we face:

- Staffing - providing adequate staffing levels in support positions is very difficult and can create inequities between schools. A school of 73 students with a full time nurse, librarian or school counselor will not have the same workload and job responsibilities as one of these positions in a school of 210. The need for allied arts positions in small elementary schools also means that some employees are split between multiple buildings.
- Grade level configuration - this is how we configure grade levels at individual schools. One school may have 2 classes of second grade while another has a combined first and

second grade class. Class sizes are also varied so that in some schools students are learning a class of 24 and others in a class of 12. Configurations that give average class sizes of 15-18 students means our kids have a greater diversity of thinking and opportunities for multiple instructional groupings. Stable configurations of classes also allows for a consistent and guaranteed curriculum for all students.

- At the middle and high school level, a declining enrollment can reduce the options available to students in elective and advanced courses because the number of students enrolling in those classes falls well below the minimum class sizes.
- Intervention services - delivering these services can be very limited, by the difficulties in staffing, the need to provide individual versus small group interventions due to the demands of scheduling or lack of other students, or the difficulty of delivering highly specialized services due to staffing.
- Professional development - teachers in small schools do not always have the benefit of grade level teams, instructional coaches, or support from librarians and tech integrationists.
- Transportation - making sure that we still provide transportation without creating ride times that exceed district parameters.
- Community identity - discussions about closing or reconfiguring schools in our smallest communities can cause a great deal of grief and concern. Schools are seen as hubs of our small communities and loss of that "community center" brings fear that the community may cease to exist.

In addition to these challenges, the community is also looking for ways to increase programming before and after school.

At the heart of many of the discussions surrounding school configuration in WCUUSD, is determining the level of service that we will provide to our school community. Questions like mental health services, building use, developing community schools, and course offerings are key to what the community has indicated that they want. How we balance the desire for services with financial sustainability is the struggle that our communities face.