

Testimony to: **House Education Committee**

Respectfully Submitted by: **Wendy Baker Ed.D, Superintendent, Addison Central School District**

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Thank you, Chair Conlon and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify today regarding governance and scale. My testimony focuses on the importance of accessible scale and the state support and legislative action I believe are necessary for Vermont to achieve it equitably across the state. Through today's testimony, I will put forward three recommendations using two examples of my involvement with educational organizations striving for the benefits of scale, one involving a small program within Southern New Hampshire University and another regarding a small K-5 school within ACSD. The differences in approach between them provides a helpful comparison.

Small schools require nimble, community-oriented management. They can function well as part of a district with sufficient infrastructure. Scale at any level can be a tool to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness, if used correctly, that small schools can benefit from in many ways. The recommendations highlighted in this report are designed to strengthen small schools across Vermont that meet viability metrics established by the legislature, implemented by districts, and enforced by the Secretary of Education.

Foundational Vermont Education Experience

I began my career as an educator in Vermont in 1993 teaching middle school humanities at a K-8 school of approximately 150 students in the Northeast Kingdom. As a National Board Certified Teacher, I joined the Vermont Department of Education in 1999 as one of the original members of Vermont's School Improvement Team, formed before federal No Child Left Behind legislation. As part of that team, I participated in the development of Vermont's original accountability system, including Vermont's transition from Public School Approval Standards to our present Education Quality Standards (EQS). I worked with forty Vermont schools to raise student achievement and served as a consultant for four other states working to achieve higher student outcomes systemically, at scale. Following my state experience, my service in the field as a principal at Peoples Academy Middle Level and a superintendent in Orange East Supervisory Union (OESU) gave me the opportunity to use the strong improvement systems and supports built across the State for the benefit of students under my supervision. The Department's [Roots of Success](#) document featured an OESU elementary school I supported to make significant student achievement gains during this time by bringing high-leverage literacy practices to scale at the supervisory union level. It was a privilege to participate in building and implementing the system within our state that led to **twelve years of sustained academic improvement for Vermont students** between 2000 and 2012 in all subject areas as indicated by the Secretary in her presentation of state assessment trajectories over the past 24 years.

I currently serve as the superintendent of Addison Central School District, located in Addison County. Our 1750 PreK-12 students come from the towns of Bridport, Cornwall, Middlebury, Ripton, Salisbury, Shoreham, and Weybridge. Our seven elementary schools range in size from 38 to 353 students who come together in 6th grade at Middlebury Union Middle School (384) and continue to Middlebury Union High School (530).

Upon unification in 2017, ACSD began the process to become a certified International Baccalaureate (IB) World School District which offers the IB PreK-12 continuum of Primary Years, Middle Years, and Diploma Programs. This coordinated curriculum, fully implemented in 2020, provides a consistent and successful framework of proficiency-based learning and assessment throughout the district. We cultivate opportunities and coursework that encourage an international mindset, prioritize critical thinking, and develop student agency across learning experiences taking place daily within nine schools. All ACSD students undertake two culminating projects in their 5th and 10th grade years where they demonstrate their skill as cross-disciplinary inquirers and passionate problem solvers who envision social action. In 2024-25, we became the **first public school district in the country** to undergo joint K-12 accreditation between the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) and IB. We are working closely with NEASC and IB and expect to come through the process favorably, earning NEASC accreditation as a K-12 system, and five-year reauthorization as an IB World District.

ACSD has had a dynamic decade: We became a unified school district, we adopted a coordinated curriculum, we weathered the pandemic, and we experienced a significant leadership transition. We are turning our focus, once again, to the achievement levels of our students in literacy and math in addition to maintaining our rich inquiry-driven, transdisciplinary, concept-based curricular offerings aligned with Vermont standards. Across ACSD, there is an acknowledgement that we have likely come as far as we can to maximize student success without reconfiguring our delivery model. Part of this acknowledgement comes within the context of housing shortages, decreased higher education support for teacher development, licensed and unlicensed staff shortages, and pandemic-level scarcity of substitute teachers.

The ACSD Board has set a goal of 80% VTCAP proficiency in its 2024-29 Strategic Plan. We will not achieve this goal unless we achieve greater scale in our delivery model. We have begun the process of doing so in pursuit of stronger academic outcomes, as measured by the VTCAP assessment, our subject area screeners, and rich proficiency-based success measures. Our current configuration presents challenges to efficiency and effectiveness, as not more than 61% of students in any ACSD grade level cohort reaches proficiency on the VTCAP assessments in any subject.

I recommend the following for legislative action: 1) state-level governance change, 2) revision of District Quality Standards to include a school viability standard, and 3) support for voluntary district merger to achieve a size of 2000-4000 students. I offer the following anecdotal evidence to assist the committee's understanding of these recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Return the Agency of Education to a Commissioner's leadership structure reporting to a strong State Board of Education to create sustained, apolitical educational leadership.

I believe this recommended shift is the most important action the legislature can take to put the state back on the right track toward improved student achievement because it will return educational leadership at the state level to ensure an apolitical, sustained focus on student outcomes and school and district viability. It is difficult to ignore the parallels between Vermont's twelve-year trajectory of improved student achievement under a Commissioner of Education and a strong State Board of Education and its steady twelve-year decline under a Secretary of Education and weak State Board of Education model. This decline began pre-pandemic, and has occurred despite the efforts of four hard-working Secretaries of Education, two different governors, and two different political parties.

Small school management requires a clear understanding of specific goals that respond to Vermont values, and consistent implementation of those commitments across systems over multiple years. Decisions about how best to manage the operation of these schools are best based on a sustainable, shared vision of educational quality and school viability against a non-partisan standard that represents educational excellence across our state.

Rapid scale can prey on transformative educational programming when the entity guiding the scaling lacks, by its nature, sustained commitment to shared vision, transparent operational direction, and a clear, apolitical accountability structure.

In an apolitical environment the "why" becomes clear and actionable, and can be trusted by the field and Vermont communities. Everyday work focuses on how to build strong schools through able state systemic support rather than implementing a single official's political agenda, which may or may not be in alignment with that goal.

I don't believe this foundation is achievable under the current roles and responsibilities model of the State Board of Education and leader of the Agency of Education because **the focus and execution of political leadership is different from that of educational leadership**, which develops public trust and sustained, tangible results for students. I believe the state assessment student achievement record supports this conclusion. Currently in Vermont, educational leadership only exists at the district level which may be inequitably applied across the state as the Secretary has stated.

Scaling Dramatically Without Strong, Sustained Vision Can Lead to Regret

In 2013, I left public service to lead a set of Vermont graduate programs in education that had operated across the state since their development at Trinity College in the early 1990s. Acquired by Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) in 2000, the programs enrolled 200 learners in 2013 as enrollment had declined in tough financial times. Within three years, 8% of all Vermont K-12 teachers were enrolled in the SNHUVT's transformative graduate programming. Within three more years, our team moved away from Vermont to report to main campus leadership in NH and our programs expanded and scaled to reach 20,000 learners across multiple states and countries, grossing \$22 million dollars annually. Two aspects of this experience are instructive to this committee today as it considers the right conditions for scaling Vermont's educational system.

1. **As we grew in scale, educational priorities changed.** Program delivery methods in support of deep learning were replaced by more efficient strategies manageable by those with

fewer skills. Personalized recruitment and retention strategies were replaced with less effective, more anonymous enabling technologies with greater reach. Learning opportunities became less transformational in design in order to enable efficient replication. **In the end, transformative aspects of the programming our team led that attracted so many partnerships and students were dropped in favor of more streamlined programming that could be delivered through an efficient, replicable, educational engine that did not offer personalization or professional transformation.** I see Vermont's public education system having the same mission, and it is in danger of the same loss under the current state governance model.

2. We achieved the goal of scale with wild success. Much of our work pushed the boundaries of existing accreditation standards, university norms, and a broad suite of legal requirements and contract expectations. **We had access to widespread expertise by many seasoned employees and stable systemic capacity in support of our efforts to move fast, break things, and disrupt the status quo** as we worked to make a greater impact through increasing our capacity to reach a greater number of educators with efficiency. We were not creating the support system at the same time we were trying to go to scale as Vermont public education would be at this moment. A State Board of Education overseeing education would provide proper oversight to see that as supports for educational excellence are in place as Vermont achieves accessible scale.

Recommendation #2: District Quality Standards should be revised to include a school viability standard.

Sometimes the simplest, most expedient, and best action is to work with what you already have rather than to create something new. The District Quality Standards (DQS) articulated through Rule Series 100 under 16 V.S.A. § 165(g); 2022 Acts and Resolves No. 127, Sec. 14 come into effect in July 2025. It would be helpful to have a school viability standard added to these requirements for application at all times to any school under its supervision. The standard could address four areas commonly called into question when a school reaches a size that provokes discussions about continued viability, 1) integrity of educational programs, 2) operational feasibility, 3) financial feasibility, and 4) community context (potential for support and/or increased enrollment).

It would be advisable for the AOE to guide the field to implement the DQS in a robust manner immediately as a way to determine district viability, identify immediate focus areas for district support to be provided by the Agency's one hundred eighty-one employees, and potential for existing district infrastructure to accept other districts through a voluntary merge as an alternative to the unilateral establishment of completely new districts. New Educational Quality Standards crucial to Vermont's equity initiatives are also due to come online July 2025. District positioning to enact those standards should also be taken into consideration as district merger activity takes place.

Class Size - ACSD's first step to improve educational outcomes.

We know that academic success is predicated on students' ability to access a guaranteed and viable curriculum throughout their education. From June 2024 to January 2025, we examined the academic impact of both small and large class sizes and grade configuration patterns related to unstable

enrollment. We found that our unstable enrollment led to unpredictable grade configurations which created gaps in our curriculum that could not be made up for students over time. The variation in class sizes across ACSD's seven elementary schools (which sometimes failed to meet our minimum (10) or maximum (20-25) standards) played a significant role in the instability of grade configuration and our ability to deliver our curriculum. Further, some of our smallest schools had assessment performance challenges that had gone unnoticed due to the need to protect identifiable student data, which became a source of alarm.

We also examined 2024 VTCAP student achievement data within each school, both in the aggregate and for individual students. We assessed how far each student was from meeting proficiency cut scores in each subject and how student performance had changed from 2023-2024. Through positive changes in third grade scores, we saw evidence that our new K-2 literacy program implementation was having a positive impact. However, our student's VTCAP scores suggested that our 3-5th grade literacy instruction lacked a cohesive approach. Despite the adoption of supported and aligned mathematics curriculum and local literacy assessments recommended by the state, our mathematics performance also suggested a lack of instructional cohesion. We determined that different supports were needed to improve students' achievement levels in these areas.

With the help of professional development from Edunomics, we developed an equity-based budgeting model during FY 26 Budget development process that established the need for instructional specialists to assist in universal instruction. In order to afford these supports, we applied scale to classroom size by **increasing our average K-5 class size from 11 to 15. By increasing the scale of our classrooms we found a financial vehicle to provide better opportunities for achievement for our students.** This effort freed up \$720,000 for reinvestment in instructional specialists support funds reallocated to schools needing support to improve student achievement.

Even with an average K-5 class size of 15 across ACSD, we have barriers to student achievement goals. They include:

- Grade-level cohort data is still too small to be analyzed and reported publicly (or even shared with district colleagues), limiting our ability to advance a culture of improvement within our schools, district, board, and communities that is responsive to student assessment data of any kind, not only VTCAP data.
- Our smallest schools now all have multigrade class configurations, which is not a match for the strengths of all of our teachers or students.
- With only one instructional section, our smallest schools lack flexibility in class composition to reliably enable productive classroom communities (some grades have four cousins).
- Instability in future kindergarten enrollment numbers (2 one year and 12 the next) continues to threaten grade configuration stability within our smallest schools, which contributes to gaps in curriculum.

Class Size Scaling Can Impact School Operational Feasibility

As a result of our close examination of the potential for negative academic impacts of our current configuration in some of our smallest schools, the ACSD Board approved a revision to policy [D6: Class Size](#) on February 10, 2025. As a result, minimum class size metrics will now be met by combining two

grades when necessary. If that isn't possible, and the superintendent determines the integrity of the educational program is compromised, students will be moved as a cohort to another ACSD school if opening enrollment to families across the district in the under-enrolled classroom does not result in a class size that meets the policy. Movement into an under-enrolled class cannot jeopardize the existence of minimum class sizes in other ACSD schools.

Student success is ACSD's focus as we consider how best to scale our educational delivery model to 1) interrupt the impact of enrollment instability on students' access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum in all subject areas, 2) ensure reasonable assignments for our licensed and unlicensed staff, and 3) meet the Board's stated expectations for VTCAP student achievement by 2029. With the D6 policy revision complete, at the February 11th meeting of ACSD Board's Policy Committee, we began discussing the need for a set of guidelines the Board could develop that would guide the superintendent through the process of working alongside ACSD communities and educators to determine the need for, process of, and priorities in consideration of school reconfiguration.

Enforcing the class size minimum of 10 under ACSD's previous and new policy guidelines requires a scaling of class size that in turn impacts the viability of our smallest schools. A standard added to the District Quality Standards that identified the characteristics of school viability would assist ACSD to provide objective, apolitical leadership in this area, standardize the definition across the state, and provide superintendents and boards with a consistent way to discuss the conditions of school learning environments equitably throughout the state. ACSD would appreciate the opportunity to rely upon that definition when considering school reconfiguration

Currently, the town of Ripton is experiencing an acute enrollment challenge in the K/1 class that threatens the operational viability of the school as a whole. The key to our success through this process is working *with* the Ripton community to examine data present and future data related to the viability of RES and collaborate together to determine how best to move forward.

Not all of ACSD's six smallest schools are experiencing the acute enrollment challenges seen at RES - but each of them could, should we continue to move forward without developing new housing or should existing property cease to change hands in a way that accommodates a stable number of new families. Middlebury is the only one of our seven towns with an eminent plan for housing development.

Recommendation #3: Bills requiring voluntary merger, such as H122, should be prioritized and accompanied by a robust enforcement of revised District Quality Standards by the AOE.

ACSD already works at scale as a district in a number of areas, which helps our small schools exist in a supported manner in areas of facilities, finance, curriculum, supervision and evaluation, human resources systems, student data management, technology support, etc. The State Board should be instructed to use its authority, delegated by the legislature, to redraw district boundaries to accommodate as close to a 4000 student enrollment per district as is feasible by July 1, 2029. Districts who do not request merger will be dissolved and reassigned to districts of at least 2000 students. Further district merger activity, perhaps creating greater scale, could be reviewed after districts have been stabilized post initial merger to determine if additional efficiencies and/or student achievement opportunities can be realized through such efforts.

There is a growing interest in exploring reconfiguration options within ACSD that allow for grade sizes that meet public reporting standards, ensure all students have access to all curricular areas, and provide more single-grade teaching assignments across our K-5 classrooms.

Our district's size and resources allow us multiple options to accommodate partial reconfiguration. We are paying careful attention to our desire to ensure that students living within varying economic circumstances have the opportunity to learn alongside each other and the likelihood that costly new construction, which would be needed to accommodate at least 145 of our students, may offset any foreseeable consolidation savings.

Districts with strong infrastructure can likely accommodate more students than most of them are currently able to enroll. This is the case with ACSD. Our district staffing is 86% of the staffing model proposed within the Secretary's district office staffing proposal for a district of 4000 students. Our staffing level was designed to serve a district with 15% more students (1900) and nine buildings. With very few additional staff members, we could serve a student population of at least double our enrollment without adding the same proportion of staff, particularly should any future building consolidation take place. This analysis aligns with the Vermont Superintendent Association's assertion that districts of 2000 students enable strong infrastructure to meet District Quality Standards (DQS), and the Picus report's analysis that approximately 3900 students per district is an inflection point for efficiency and effectiveness in district operations.

In conclusion: I encourage the committee to support a process of scaling that is accessible to each of our schools and districts in order to promote equitable access to the benefits of scale. Scale will feel accessible if the State provides objective, sustained and visionary leadership, consistent and clear viability standards, and adequate supports at the school, district, and community level to enable communities to participate in the process of how best to achieve scale in support of priorities closely held at the local level that align with our state's vision for education.

Tough conversations can and should be led by districts within local communities when necessary to support student success. The legislature should provide tools and timelines, the AOE should provide implementation guidance and support, and districts should provide accountable leadership. With these ingredients, Vermont communities have made great strides on behalf of the students in their care in the past. I hope to have the opportunity to do so again at this inflection point.