

Testimony to House Committee on Education

Wednesday, February 26, 2026

Stand for Students Day

My name is Lisa Ellis. I am a preschool teacher at First Branch Unified SD which is part of White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU). Some might also know my current campus as the former K-12 Chelsea Public School which for 3 years has housed preschool and our middle school. Through visionary and inclusive thinking, our program has blended state and local funding with federal Head Start funding into one district preschool program. This has resulted in decreasing barriers to access such as income and transportation. Also, due to our small size and collaboration we have been able to provide some of the most unique opportunities for young families to find needed support in small town Vermont.

I will begin by explaining how this district program has supported the Chelsea-Tunbridge economy. We have added a community preschool choice for families. Being in the Chelsea village, allows family members who work remotely to walk their preschool children to school daily, either for personal wellness or due to limited transportation options. Our program has also visited community businesses such as the local post office, the town forest, and farms for classroom field trips. State child care subsidies have helped us provide aftercare until 5 pm so our program is accessible to working families. One of my paraeducators walks to work every day. Without this geographic convenience she would be limited to only 1 of her 2 jobs. Another paraeducator, cut her commute from 1.5 hours per day to 10 minutes per day. This is a HUGE deal to any low- to middle-income household given increased costs in our state. Our preschool has allowed several of our parents (and grandparents) who were not working at all to start working again. This includes working as much needed teacher substitutes within our schools. We have also retained and recruited more licensed teachers and additional staff to our smaller district as a result of having a full-day preschool program.

Now I will share with you how I believe that it is community and collaboration that supports our youngest students. It is not size or economies of scale. Thanks to our blended funding with Head Start we have brought the ECHO Leahy Center Education Department to enhance Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) opportunities. This also allowed us to bring their Museum-on-Wheels to the Chelsea gymnasium for a community event. The Chandler Center for the Arts has performed for us. Older students and middle school teachers have served as classroom lunch buddies and guest readers. We have a Head Start family advocate who supports our families with economic needs including home visiting to work on family-centered goals such as co-parenting, or cooking healthy meals on a limited income. Our school nurse sends home food to needy families. This January, we also hosted an after-school sledding and snow-shoeing party for families where. We taste tested a student authored and cooked "Stone Soup," and handed out state resources to families. For families with young children, the long commutes shown in some proposed Act 73 maps will make community events like this nearly impossible to attend.

Our supervisory union also provides our district with resources beyond its business office and human resources. Our Preschool Coordinator manages the very complicated task of out-of-district Act 166 applications and enrollments. She also provides my program with peer support, intervention and coaching in her areas of expertise. She also helps organize

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professional development for our teachers, as well federal mandates such as Child Find Screenings. She also helps us get grants for equipment shared with other SU districts for events such as our Winter Tumble Time events. These are not tasks that others in our district can complete because many of our preschool teachers dually serve as Preschool Site Directors to meet state licensing requirements.

I have worked as an early childhood educator in districts of different sizes in Vermont. This has allowed me to see all sorts of ways in which public education has been striving to only get better and do better with the resources we have available. **From my experience, for at least our most vulnerable and younger students/families, smaller is better. Bigger is not.** First Branch is the first Vermont district I have observed teachers fully USING and TRAINED on research-based curricula instead of these pricey purchases collecting dust on a shelf. Thanks to an EFFECTIVE supervisory union, I can access coaching for anything from preschool program administration, social -emotional supports and early math teaching. This coaching is encouraged but not required. At First Branch, we have worked hard to ensure that if a student has an identified need that could affect current or future learning, they are given the option to access any of the available district or SU services such as counseling, case management, speech, occupational therapy, nursing and intervention. If we do not already have something we try our best to find it. **Could we do this without our Supervisory Union team? No, we could not. Is it a system that is perfect? No it is not.** However, we are trying our hardest to give our students EQUITABLE ACCESS to everything a Vermont public education system offers. Bigger districts will only lead to more red tape, politics and complicated systems for our students, families and teachers to navigate.

Thank you for your time.

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