

## Testimony House Ways and Means on H 949

Thursday April 30, 2026

Hello – my name is Cindy Senning. Thank you for inviting me to testify – I represent Duxbury on the Board of Harwood Unified Union School District and serve there as vice chair. Our chair would be here this morning but she has been away, returned very late last night and would not have been able to prepare.

1. I have lived in Duxbury for over 50 years and been a parent of two children who attended Duxbury Primary and Harwood 7-12, I am a grandparent of five children currently in pre-school, Brookside Primary, and Crossett Brook Middle School. I was a health ed teacher and school nurse at Harwood, principal at Duxbury Primary School, and served on three school boards (Duxbury, Waterbury-Duxbury, and HUUSD). I attended Graduate School at UVM where I received my Masters in Education and a Doctorate in Educational Administration. My dissertation was on local control in a small primary school in Vermont. Not the district in which I lived and worked.

2. I would be remiss if I did not begin talking to you about my strong belief that we have an excellent public school system here in Vermont and I am really hoping we do not do anything to bring it down in our efforts to improve it. In particular I can list some of the accolades that back that belief up;

U.S. News & World Reports worked with a digital media company using data from the U.S. Department of Education to rank over 70,000 public schools on four indicators: mathematics proficiency, reading proficiency, mathematics performance and reading performance. Let me mention that last year in the Vermont ranking our district had three of the top ten elementary schools. Waitsfield, Warren, and Moretown. Needless to say all of us on the HUUSD Board were very proud.

1. Marion W. Cross School (PK-6) - Norwich
2. Cavendish Town Elementary School (PK-6) - Proctorsville
3. Waitsfield Elementary School (PK-6) - Waitsfield
4. Stowe Elementary School (PK-5) - Stowe
5. Rumney Memorial School (PK-6) - Middlesex
6. Braintree Elementary School (PK-6) - Braintree
7. Hinesburg Community School (PK-8) - Hinesburg

8. Washington Village School (PK-4) - Washington
9. Warren Elementary School (PK-6) - Warren
10. Moretown Elementary School (PK-6) - Moretown

As cited in the World Population Review on a national level Vermont reportedly has the highest graduation rate in the country at 94.6% - that's number ONE in the rankings.

In 2024 Forbes ranked all states in standardized test performance. Vermont ranked in the Top Ten nationally.

Vermont's ranking has for the last 20 years exceeded the national average in SAT scores.

Also - on a more personal level - my two children returned to Vermont to raise families here in large part because they valued their public-school experience highly.

Understandably people leave Vermont for jobs, economic reasons and housing but rarely do I hear of someone leaving because of our schools. Quite the contrary, they come here for our schools for the small personal community they experience in them.

Take some time to talk to the schools in your district and ask how many students go on to colleges or the trade schools of their choice. I am confident that our public schools prepare students for their futures

3. We all can agree that despite my above comments we do need change in our education system. That change encompasses a number of factors. We need to:

- Focus on the declining enrollment
- Focus on current funding
- Focus on a funding formula
- Focus on property taxes and other forms of income
- Focus on the cost drivers pushing us into unmanageable budgets
  - Health insurance
  - Mental health services
  - Transportation
  - Underfunded special education mandates
  - Energy costs

Many of these are essential social services for sure AND schools are being forced to provide them in their education budgets. School nurses, mental health workers, special services for handicapped, etc.

The governor's proposal and H 949 do NOT address these issues. All they do is cap budgets loaded with these non-education services and push for consolidation - large districts, large schools, and large classes. I recognize the legislature can't change it all nor can we. We know you all are working hard to manage some of these budget issues BUT you can take the fiscal responsibility for getting these non-education services out of the education budget.

Right now we are feeling pressure pushing us in the wrong direction with h 949's reduction of the excess spending threshold from 118% to 112%. This reduction imposed on our educational spend brings us to a level that will have an adverse effect on students in anticipation of a funding formula that may or may not be established in years to come. In the meantime the reduced budgets will add to the cuts we have already experienced - cuts totaling one third of our budget in three years. Among other things we have already:

cut more than 50 positions: of those position cuts;

- 36.3 are Teaching positions
- 3 are Administrators
- 14.8 are Support Staff
  
- Total of 54.1 positions

We also have:

Eliminated all primary school foreign language programs

Cut a school nurse position

Reduced a number of bus routes

Reduced coaching and supplies in the athletic programs

Next on the chopping block should this forced reduction in the excess spending threshold come about - the only way to describe it is as a chopping block- could be;

- Reducing course offerings, particularly electives, advanced coursework, and specialized programs that enrich the student experience
- Reducing academic supports and interventions that help struggling students succeed
- Scaling back enrichment programs such as STEM initiatives, career and technical education opportunities, field trips & associated transportation, and experiential learning
- Reducing student support services, including counseling, behavioral support, and specialized instructional services
- Athletic programs (Would you want to choose between soccer, basketball, hockey, wrestling, golf, tennis, gymnastics?)
- Limiting extracurricular programs which clearly will affect students - skiing, outdoor studies, environmental studies, clubs, theater, arts and music

All of these have a direct effect on students.

Of course, we will continue to include those programs the legislature has mandated (need I say without dedicated funding)? Pre k for all children in our district (we are only one of a minority of states requiring pre-k a valuable, essential service indeed but quite expensive) and universal meals to name just two.

It is without a doubt that to make the changes required will take time and resources - human resources: legislators, educators, parents, community members, financial experts, and students. We cannot expect to make well thought out changes to our entire system in nine months. I know this from personal experience. Twenty years ago Waterbury and Duxbury needed to change for different reasons. Those two boards (on one of which I was a member) got together, consolidated the two school districts into one, built a new middle school, switched the location of grade levels, Waterbury/Duxbury 7th and 8th graders came to Crossett Brook Middle School from Harwood, 5th and 6th graders from Waterbury and Duxbury primary Schools went to Crossett Brook, a section of Harwood was expanded and developed into a middle school for 7th and 8th graders from the Valley, and Duxbury k-4th graders went to what is now Brookside. Pre-school had already been merged and took place at Brookside. The Duxbury School was finished and is now an apartment building and day care center. Housing??? It took years, many many public meetings, four votes, many many board meetings, and State funding for the construction of CBMS. And now the talk is about forced consolidation for the whole state without adequate time or gathering of

the human resources needed. Currently our Board is studying our district made up of 5 primary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school for potential consolidation or revisioning building use; we will be looking at cost, educational values, buildings, and community support. We are aiming to focus on and deal with decreasing enrollment and increasing cost/student without diminishing our sound educational programs. We know this will take time and people while continuing the work of educating our children.

I want to end by reiterating the loss to our education system that will be caused by reducing the excess spending threshold to 112%. However, even more significant than that loss is the devastation that it will cause our children and grandchildren. I implore you to maintain the threshold at its current rate.

Thank you for all your efforts and your attention to H949.