# Vermont School Redistricting Task Force

January 20, 2026
Rebecca Holcombe

**Cooperative Education Services** (Quick scale where it matters most)

**+**

**Voluntary Strategic Mergers** (incentivized)

**+**

**Voluntary Regional High Schools** (incentivized)

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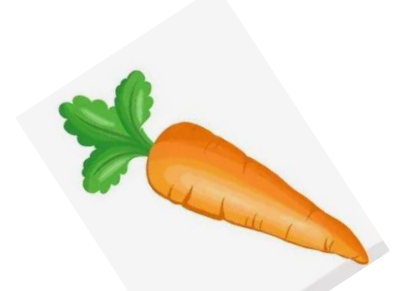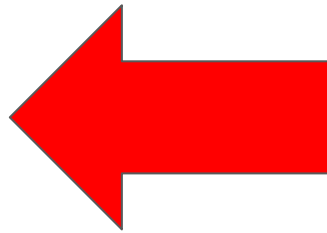Rebecca Holcombe

**Cooperative Education Services**
(Quick scale where it matters most)

Today's focus:
- What are shared services?
- Why shared services?
- Design considerations

Full report pp. 1-54, Appendices A and F

# Overall Proposal Goals

**Grow the economy**

(high quality schools/ facilities attract Vermonters, build business, and strengthen Vermont communities)

**Make Vermont more affordable**

(implement an evidence-based change that demonstrably has potential to save  money)

**Protect the most vulnerable**

(fair school access and opportunities for all children, including in rural and higher poverty areas, safety nets)

## Why this proposal exists

- Vermont faces rising costs, uneven access, and inconsistent implementation and quality
- Governance changes alone do not fix instructional or cost drivers
- CESAs are proposed as *infrastructure*, not governance reform

**Key question for legislators:**

How do we improve quality, equity, and cost control *without destabilizing local schools*?

# What is a Cooperative Education Service Agency?

**A CESA is:**

- A **regional public agency** that provides shared services to districts
- Operates at cost, governed by member districts
- Focuses on services that are inefficient or impossible to deliver locally

**Core principle**

- *Build once, use many times* instead of duplicating fragile capacity 52 times

# What CESAs are __NOT__

**Clarifying misconceptions**

- Not a new layer of school governance
- Not a school district
- Not a school-closure or consolidation mandate
- Not privatization

**Districts retain**

- School operation
- Budgets and staffing decisions
- Community accountability
- Instructional leadership

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# Regional shared services (CESAs) are widely used, including in rural states

| BOCES? | STATE | RURAL POPULATION 2023 | Education less expensive than Vermont? |
|---|---|---|---|
| NO | Vermont | 66.1% | |
| YES | Maine | 61.5% | YES |
| YES | West Virginia | 55.2% | YES |
| YES | Mississippi | 54.4% | YES |
| YES | Montana | 47.1% | YES |

# Why Do Rural States Use Cooperative Services?

Small districts can struggle to sustain:

- Specialized staff
- High-quality PD
- IDEA compliance capacity
- Purchasing leverage
- Breadth of opportunity
- Responsiveness to emergent needs
- Full business stack
- Data and information management
- Grants management
- Implementation of legislative initiatives



*Zoe McDonald / Vermont Public*

# Example: What happened when instructional shifts intended by Act 173 of 2018 were not implemented?

**Figure 6. Staffing patterns: K12 teachers down 8% between FY20-25, but support staff numbers are increasing**

## Staffing patterns: K12 teachers down 8% between FY20-25, but support staff numbers are increasing

| Change from FY20 to FY25* | FTE Change | % Change |
|---|---|---|
| Student enrollment | -5,508 | -7.2% |
| **Teachers** | **-164** | **-2.0%** |
| Classroom teachers (K-12) | -417 | -8.0% |
| Pre-K teachers | 46 | 22.8% |
| Special educators (driven by child count) | 86 | 6.3% |
| **Administrators** | **112** | **12.1%** |
| Principals or assistant principals | 19 | 4.5% |
| CTE directors/adult education specialists | 13 | 73.2% |
| **Support staff** | **814** | **22.1%** |
| Behavior specialists | 95 | 108.3% |
| Behavior interventionists | 111 | 67.4% |
| Reading interventionists | 128 | 85.4% |
| Math interventionists | 99 | 126.9% |
| Paraprofessionals | -354 | -9.0% |

➢ Number of K-12 classroom teachers has **fallen** in line with the decline in student enrollment (**K12 teachers down 8%, students down 7%**)

➢ Number of CTE directors has increased

➢ Number of Pre-K teachers has increased

➢ Numbers of support staff have increased significantly (22%)
  ○ Weak implementation of Act 173 at state level
  ○ Possible shift of non-education costs to the Education Fund

➢ Number of special educators increases as the number of students identified as eligible for an IEP increases.

➢ Excludes increases in staffing in taxpayer-funded private schools.

*Table includes only selected subcategories of staff from each category. As a result, subcategory changes do not sum to category total changes.

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# The Core Value Proposition



**What CESAs add to a state system**

- Immediate benefits from scale
- Faster impact than mergers
- Lower transition risk
- More consistent access by geography

**CESAs focus on**

- High-cost / low-frequency work
- State priority implementation
- Equity of access across district

# Where CESAs Create Immediate Leverage

**High-impact service areas**

- Special education evaluations and itinerant services
- Professional development tied to state priorities
- IT, Business operations and procurement
- Career & Technical Education coordination
- On-demand supports for rural and high-poverty schools
- Grants management

# Cost Control Mechanism (Not Assumptions)

**How CESAs protect taxpayers**

- Services priced at cost
- Annual independent audits
- Surplus refunds to districts
- Minimum multi-district participation rules
- Limits on single-district dominance

**Key point**

- CESAs replace fragmented services; they do not stack on top of them

# Speed and Risk Comparison

**Why CESAs before mergers**

- Benefits begin as soon as services are shared
- No contract equalization shock
- No construction dependency
- No multi-year governance transition
- Provide stability and resilience

(The longer report documents these considerations)

# Example: What if federally funded position at AOE are reduced?

**Figure 7. Position Count at DOE/AOE - FY03 to FY24**

## Position Count at DOE/AOE - FY03 to FY24

Legend: ■ Position Count at DOE/AOE — Trendline for Position Count at DOE/AOE

Y-axis: Position Count at DOE/AOE (100 to 225)
X-axis: Fiscal Year (2003 to 2024)
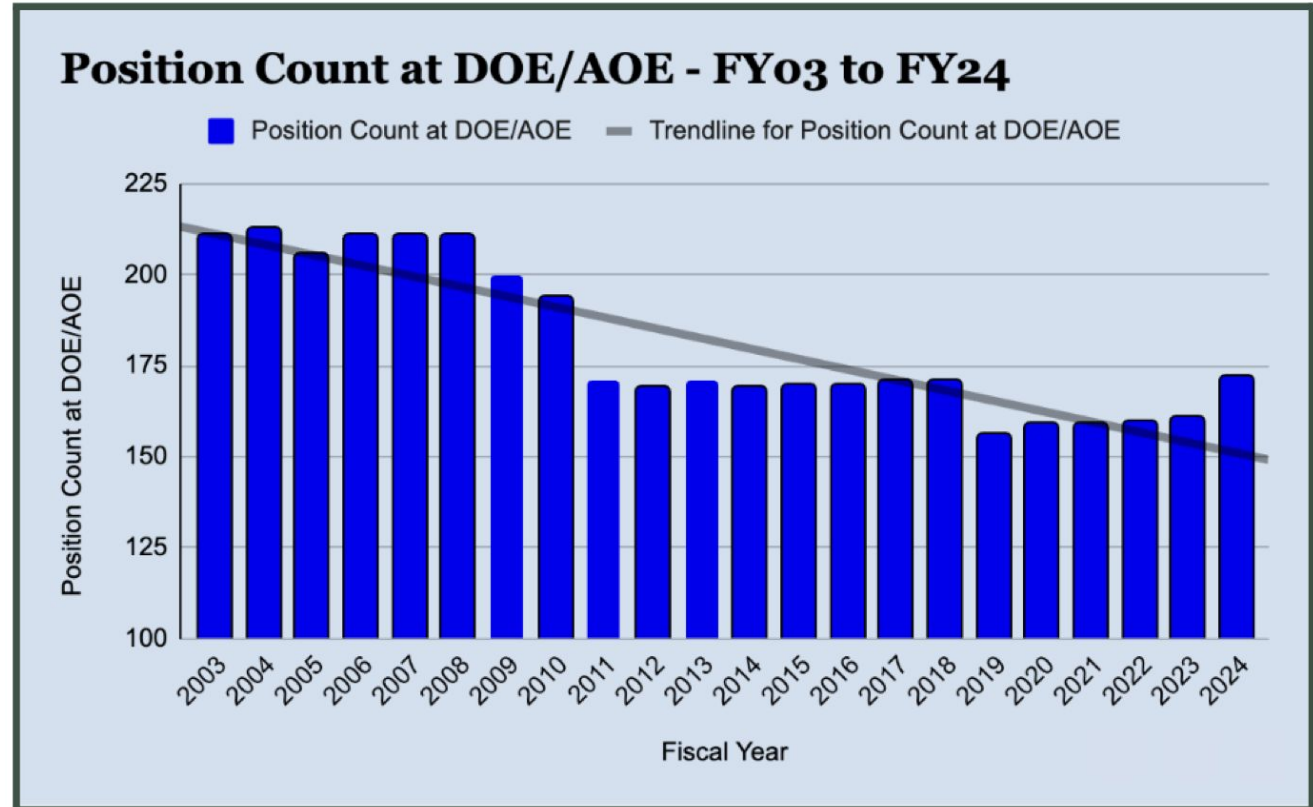
# Mandatory Participation, Local Flexibility

**What is mandatory**

- Membership in a regional CESA

**What is local**

- Which services to share
- Pace and sequencing
- Governance representation

**Rationale**

- Prevents free-rider problem
- Ensures statewide coverage



**Important Point:** Allows for customization according to local student needs and local conditions/geography

# Why CESAs Are a Precondition for Larger Reform

**Structural logic**

- Strategic mergers (Section 2) depend on shared capacity and planning
- Regional high schools (Section 3) require coordinated planning (see slides 23-25 for an example)
- CESAs provide the *operating spine* for either path

# Risks and Guardrails

**Acknowledged risks**

- Weak implementation
- Duplication if functions not actively retired at the local level
- Insufficient AOE capacity
- Poor collaboration

**Built-in protections**

- Audit and transparency requirements
- Clear division of responsibility
- Phased rollout
- Evaluation metrics tied to services

# Regional shared services are used in other sectors

See the Governor's strategy for health care reform, as presented at the December all-members caucus.

## Regionalization

- The goal of regionalization is to **ensure that our health care resources are optimally distributed** so that Vermonters can access the right care, at the right time, at the right place, and at an affordable cost.
- This can include **improving how organizations work together**, for example by sharing administrative services, coordinating patient transfers between hospitals, or redesigning how clinical services are delivered
- Regionalization helps **protect access to essential services over the long term**, rather than risking losing them altogether.

VERMONT
AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES

# Administration: a CESA to ensure "that CTE quality, access, and alignment do not vary by region or delivery model."

**VERMONT**
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

## 1. Statewide Governance and Delivery Through a CTE Education Service Agency (ESA)

Vermont will establish a statewide Education Service Agency (ESA) for CTE to provide unified leadership, high-quality program delivery, and system design that is focused on students, statewide needs, and coherence across learning environments. Under this model:

Administration's proposal in the Senate to use a CESA for CTE.

# What the Legislature Is Being Asked to Decide

**Policy decisions**

- Whether to require regional shared services statewide
- Whether to prioritize CESAs before governance consolidation
- Whether to invest limited state capacity in lower-risk reforms first

**Core legislative test:**

**Does this create real capacity where Vermont currently has none?**

# Proposed Map regions for CESAs
# (to be modified based on input)

- Regional collaborations of Supervisory Districts and Supervisory Unions --

- SUs and SDs can request realignment based on existing relationships (e.g. OESU)

- Rapid scale where it matters most:
  - Shared functions to a regional level
  - more affordably and effectively

Unlike mergers, this proposal can yield immediate and lower risk benefits to cost, quality and access.
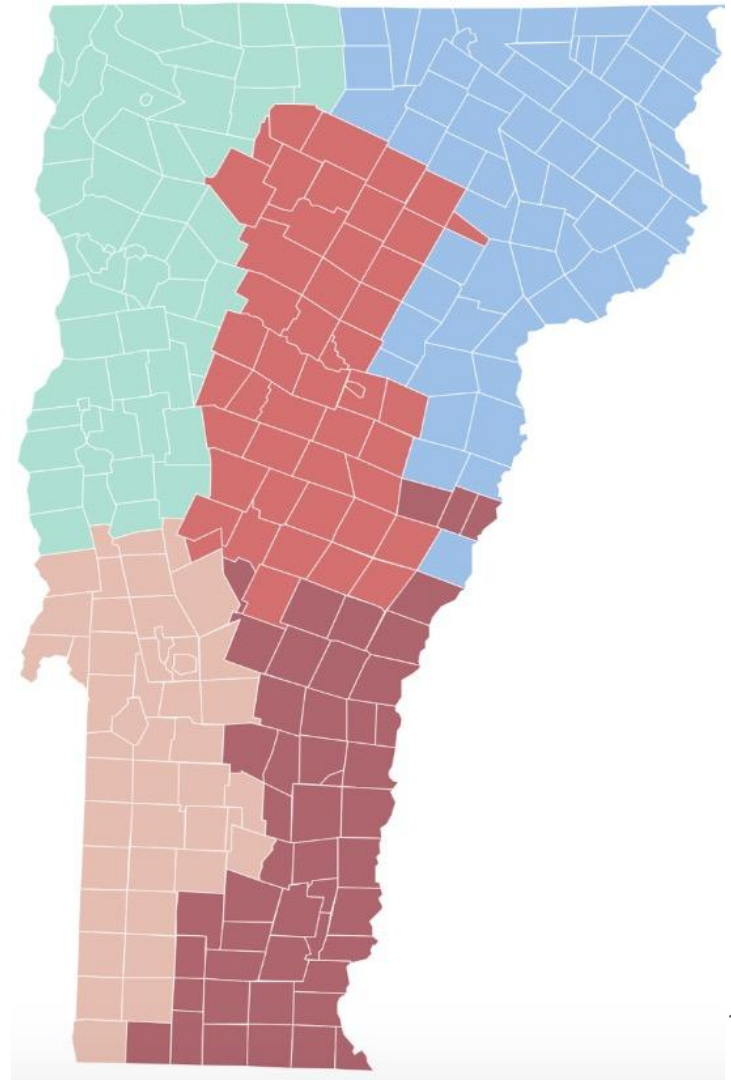
**From the first voluntary BOCES set up under Act 168 of 2024:**

*This BOCES has "been my life line in the last few years. Not only are there cost savings but a depth of resources that I have not had at my fingertips in Vermont for a very long time."*

–Dr. Sherry Sousa, Mountain Views Superintendent, part of the new SE BOCES

**Looking forward (See Appendix E Full report , sections 2 and 3):**

| Enrollment based on data provided by VSA (note grade spans vary, but trend is clear) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School | 1994-5 | 2004-5 | 2014-5 | 2024-5 |
| Spaulding (Barre) | 963 | 1013 | 842 | 675 |
| Montpelier | 437 | 271 | 282 | 393 |
| Twinfield K12 | 533 | 480 | 420 | 305 |
| U32 7-12 | 910 | 848 | 801 | 708 |

*(Data Source:* Vermont Superintendents Association)

From FY95 to FY25, istudent counts in these schools dropped by about 762 students.

## Facilities index

| SU or SD | % Depleted |
|---|---|
| BARRE UNIFIED UNION SD | 85.20% |
| Montpelier Roxbury | 85.60% |
| WASHINGTON CENTRAL UNIFIED | 59.00% |

*(Data Source:* AOE, 2022)

Vermont School Facilities Inventory and Assessment. Act 72 of 2021, Section 3.[10]

# Central Vermont set to vote on whether to build the state's first standalone career center

Central Vermont Career Center is asking residents to approve a $149 million bond for the construction of a school building.

By Erin Petenko
October 17, 2025, 6:28 pm

Facebook  Bluesky  X  Email  LinkedIn  WhatsApp

**Applications to Central Vermont Career Center on the rise**



Applicants

Accepted

New app process starts

450
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0

FY 21    FY 22    FY 23    FY 24    FY 25    FY 26
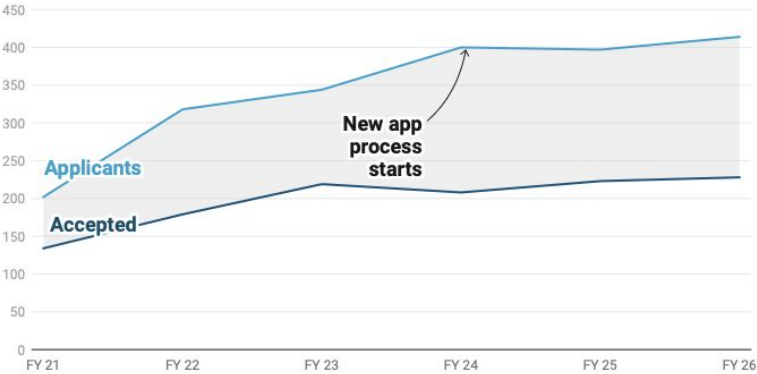
Chart: Erin Petenko • Source: CVCCSD • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper



30 Min Drive Time

- Harwood UHS
- Montpelier HS
- Northfield MHS
- Spaulding UHS
- U32
- Williamstown MHS
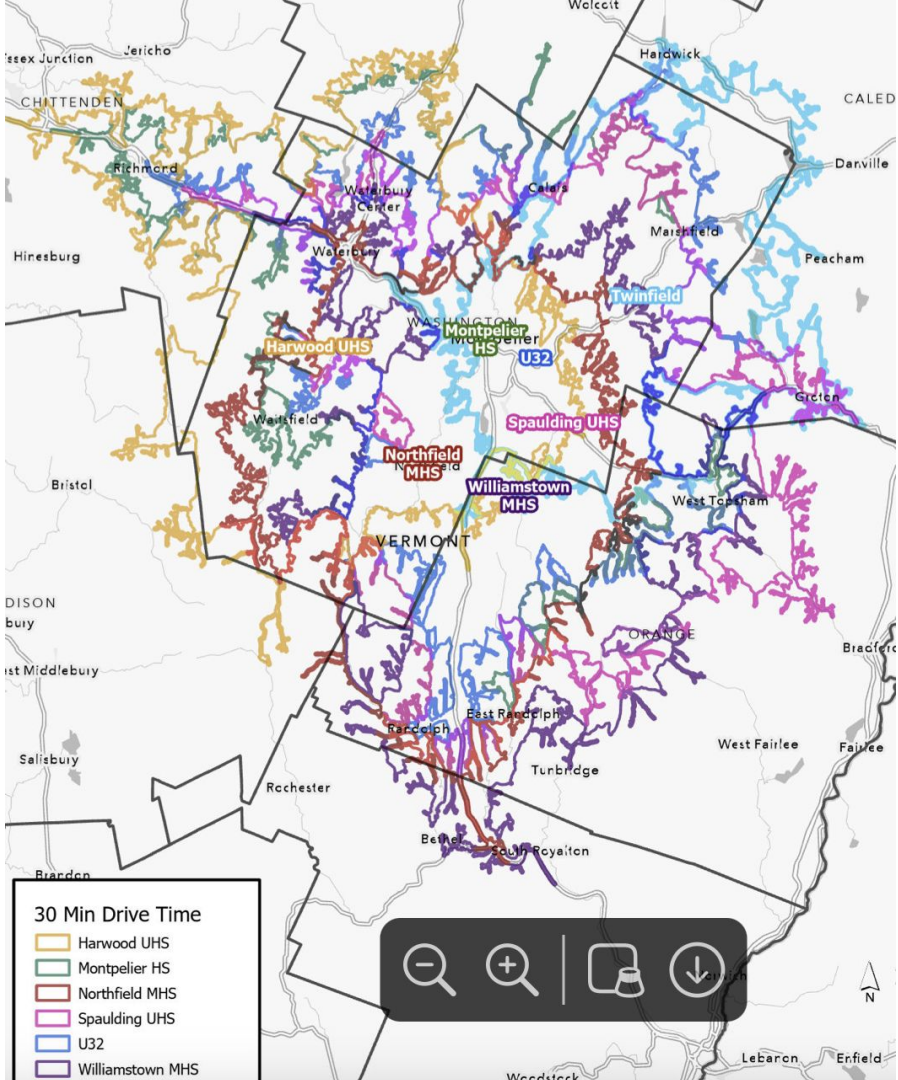
# Notes:

Full proposal is here:
https://aoa.vermont.gov/sites/aoa/files/Appendix%20E_%20The%20Vermont%20Regional%20Education%20Partnership%20Model_UPDATED%2012.2.25%20v.%202.pdf

References to research and evidence that inform recommendations are documented in the footnotes.

See Appendix A (p. 137) for **examples of how CESAs address drivers of higher cost and lower quality**

See Appendix F (p. 154) for additional discussion of **drivers of Sagging Student Performance and CESA-Intervention Options**

# Thank You

- Thank you to the over 5000 individual Vermonters, including students, who provided input to the Task Force.
- Thank you to the VT educators, administrators and business managers who generously gave their time to the development of the ideas in this proposal.
- Thank you to the AOE staff who worked hard to clean and provide data to inform the Task Force thinking and work.
- Thank you to the university faculty members and national experts who shared research and in one case, read and offered feedback on the draft proposal.

# Appendices

# Appendix A: CESAs vs Mandatory District Mergers: Comparison

| Dimension | Mandatory District Mergers | Cooperative Service Agencies |
|---|---|---|
| Improving learning | Indirect; governance change does not improve instruction | Direct; shared PD, instructional support, implementation capacity |
| Cost efficiencies | Uncertain; transition, contract leveling, transport costs | Targeted; shared services, procurement, reduced duplication |
| Speed of impact | 3–5 years typical | Immediate once services launch |
| Risk level | High political, fiscal, and operational risk | Lower, incremental, reversible |
| Equitable access | May worsen rural access through closures | Expands access regardless of district size |
| Consistency statewide | Variable; depends on new district leadership | High; regional infrastructure aligned to state priorities |
| Effect on local schools | Potential closure or consolidation pressure | Schools remain intact |
| Implementation burden on AOE | Heavy, fragmented | Concentrated through 5 regions |

# Appendix B: Special Education Delivery (see [Report](#))

**Current problem**

- Failed implementation of Act 173, need for professional development to improve primary first instruction
- Rising identification
- Inconsistent implementation of Act 173
- Staffing shortages and uneven access
- Overreliance on restrictive placements

**CESA solution**

- Regional evaluation teams
- Shared specialists (SLP, OT, psych, BCBA)
- Regional programs for low-incidence, high-intensity needs
- Consistent PD tied to instructional shifts and improvement

# Appendix C: Shared Business Services

Other states: shared business and cooperative purchasing models, achieve cost savings

**Full-stack Central Business Office (CBO)** budgeting, general ledger, payroll, A/P, bank reconciliation, cash management, claims auditing, standardized calendar and chart of accounts, financial tools.

**Purchasing** custodial supplies/liners, cafeteria staples, paper, medical/nurse supplies, auto/bus parts, AV/IT peripherals, fuel (where logistics permit).

**Technology: a**ggregated licensing (SIS/LMS/security), network operations, device bundles, installment purchasing for capital equipment.

# Appendix D: Professional Development

**Requirement** of continuous, researched based, high quality professional development.

- Inconsistent and incoherent implementation across the state
- Inconsistent quality, access, and cost at local level
- Bundling the work in a CESA  model creates cost savings, improved programming, more coherence.

**Examples**
Cultivating professionals: recruitment, retention, building capacity
Academic achievement: specific content, pedagogy, support systems, school culture

**Appendix E: Ramp up Example**

**special education**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| YEAR **0** | **(set-up):** Charter the five regions; publish the roster; adopt uniform cost-allocation rules; post preliminary price sheets. | |
| YEAR **1** | **(core services live):** Stand up evaluation teams, itinerant related services, assistive-tech support, behavior consults, and parent education; publish first dashboards; complete the first audit. | |
| YEAR **2** | **(expand options):** Launch at least one regional day program per region as justified by need; begin biennial program reviews. | |
| ONGOING | Annual audit with posted reconciliation and surplus refunds; quarterly LRE and travel-time reporting. | |

*Hasty and poorly planned and sequenced implementation could disrupt services and inflict harm on Vermont's more vulnerable students.*

# Appendix F: Role of the AOE

**AOE** ➡️ **Work deeply with 5 CESAs, instead of shallowly with every SU and SD, leading to rapid scaling of improvement**

○ Ensure consistency with state and federal law, across all regions.
○ Shared business and reporting systems by CESAs can improve data quality, provide transparency and simplify oversight. CESA level procurement could move the state to 5 systems, facilitating coordination with AOE systems.
○ Support implementation of state initiatives (e.g., professional development and instructional shifts necessary to successfully implement Act 173, Education Quality Standards, science-based literacy requirements and amplification of career-based learning and pathways in isolated rural settings).
○ Set up a dashboard and monitor implementation to ensure benefits and prevent duplication and waste