

Windham School District-Board Statement

Good afternoon members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Abigail Pelton, and I am here to share the position of the Windham School District and the residents of our town regarding the current state of education funding and reform. I hope that you have had the opportunity to review the letter that our board sent you.

On March 3, 2026, at our annual town meeting, the people of Windham spoke with clarity and unity. Two articles—Articles 7 and 8—passed unanimously. That is not something we take lightly. It reflects a community that is engaged, informed, and deeply concerned.

Our town's message is straightforward: statewide education funding systems are not working for Windham.

We believe the system, including the implementation of Act 73, has failed to provide the equitable and accessible education guaranteed under the Vermont Constitution. At the same time, it has created unsustainable property tax burdens that disproportionately impact small, rural communities like ours.

This concern is not theoretical—it is grounded in lived experience.

Windham is not a typical district. We do not operate our own elementary school. We tuition our students to neighboring schools. Our middle and high school students are part of a larger district. Our Elementary District operates our own transportation system, transporting our students as well as our town's middle and high school students, because the larger Districts contractor will not serve our town based on its geography. Our student population is small but growing. And our families rely on a mix of public and independent school options that meet their family's needs.

Despite operating efficiently within this structure, Windham residents face some of the highest property tax increases in the state.

We were told that Act 73 would simplify the system, reduce fragmentation, and control costs. But what we seeing is the creation of a system that does not account for geography, does not resolve major cost drivers, and does not provide sustainable tax relief.

Even more concerning, the current reform proposals fail to address the realities of towns like ours.

Both approaches risk eliminating our Districts ability to provide equitable education. Both threaten the transportation systems that make education accessible for our students. And both shift governance to models in which Windham's voice would be significantly diminished.

For us, equity is not an abstract concept. Equity means that a child can physically get to school in a timely and safe manner. It means families have access to options that work for them. It means decisions are made with an understanding of local realities.

Nearly 30 years ago, the Vermont Supreme Court made it clear that education must be equitable and accessible, regardless of a town's wealth. Yet today, we find ourselves questioning whether that promise is being fulfilled.

Windham's recent vote was a call for meaningful, structural reform.

We are asking for:

- True equity in education funding
- Guaranteed transportation for all students
- Preservation of our school choice and expansion to 7-12
- Local governance that ensures our community has a voice
- And tax relief that is tied to real, lasting reform—not temporary fixes

We are ready to work collaboratively. We are ready to be part of the solution. But we need a system that recognizes the diversity of Vermont's communities and does not force a one-size-fits-all approach.

Most importantly, we need a system that works—for our students, our families, and our taxpayers.

We urge you to listen to the unanimous voice of Windham and to take meaningful action this legislative session.

Personal Statement

I would also like to speak as a parent and resident of Windham Vt. I believe that the proposed Senate map does not adequately account for Windham, Vermont's unique geography, transportation realities, and historical educational alignments. As a result, it risks creating inequitable, unsafe, and impractical outcomes for our students and community.

Please note where Windham is located on the map. It is the most northern tip of Windham South Supervisory Union.

Windham is geographically challenging, with two steep roads connecting the town to neighboring areas—only the northern route is maintained by our town. The southern route is maintained by Townshend, has a steeper decline and is more dangerous than our town-maintained route. The proposed map will likely lead students to travel south to Brattleboro High School. Based on consistently declining numbers and its ever-increasing costs, Leland & Gray will eventually consolidate to Brattleboro. Brattleboro is approximately **40 miles away**, compared to **14 miles to Chester** or **20 miles or so to Manchester**. Sending Windham's middle and high school students to Brattleboro would create unsafe bus routes, increase costs, and impose unnecessary time burdens on students and families. The Windham school district is non-operational and provides tuition for grades k-6. Our non-operational district owns and operates a bus and collaborates with the west river district to provide equitable transportation our grade school students that wish to attend Townshend Elementary and our middle and high school students. The middle school and high school district are unable to serve our town based on our geography.

Windham's nonoperational elementary district tuitions K–6 students. Half of our students go to Chester, Londonderry and Winhall schools. Under the current proposal these towns would be included in Bennington Rutland SU, and Windham North SU. However, for grades 7–12 our students are forced to attend Leland and Gray in Townshend VT, which in this proposal is a part of the Windham South SU, and that breaks essential social and academic development connections for our students that are served elsewhere. The proposed map doesn't address this issue, forcing students to leave their established existing school networks and potentially increasing drop-out risk, travel fatigue, and disruption to extracurricular participation.

Many Windham families rely on tuition to align education with work and commuting patterns. Our town's unique geographic location creates two distinct travel corridors. One to the north which provides a transportation corridor to route 11 providing access to Londonderry, Manchester and the mountain towns as well as Chester and Springfield VT. The road to the south to route 30 provides access to Townshend and the Brattleboro area. The current proposal may force families to travel in one direction for work and another entirely different direction for schooling, increasing logistical and financial burdens for Windham families.

Windham's taxes are among the highest in the state, yet our per-student education costs are relatively low. Our housing stock is most similar to Londonderry, the mountain towns and dissimilar to Townsend and the Brattleboro area. Inclusion in **Bennington-Rutland SU** or **Windham North SU** would provide better student outcomes, improved transportation coordination, reduce bus miles, and improve cost efficiency. The current map would create inequities by pairing Windham with distant and less compatible districts.

Historically, Windham was a part of Londonderry and previously sent Windham's northern students to Chester High School prior to our joining the Leland and Gray District, demonstrating longstanding community and administrative coordination with nearby districts. Preserving this alignment maintains historical precedent and supports community cohesion. Even though we have historical ties to Leland and Gray Union, residents have advocated sending their students elsewhere.

In 2019 the town of Windham VT attempted to leave the Leland and Gray union district via a district wide vote. The vote failed given other towns reluctance to allow it to leave, however this shows the town of Windham's desire to leave its restricted middle and high school option. Leaving Windham in the Windham south SU would essentially force it to continue status quo. This is not creating a more cost-efficient system nor is it supporting the student population.

If Windham stays within Windham South SU it will face long logistical transportation times.

- Chester is approximately ~14 miles
- Manchester is approximately ~24 miles
- Townshend is approximately ~17 miles
- Brattleboro VT is approximately ~41 miles

Given these distances, **Rutland-Bennington SU** and **Windham North SU** appear to be far more practical and safer options for Windham students. They also better reflect historical ties, geographic realities, and commuting patterns, while preserving continuity for K-12 students.

For reasons of safety, equity, educational continuity, transportation efficiency, cost effectiveness, and historical precedent, Windham should not be assigned to the Windham south SU under the proposed Senate map. **I personally believe that Windham's district should be changed from k-6 tuition to k-12 tuition to better support families due to our geographical uniqueness.** Additionally, the town should be considered for **inclusion in the Rutland-Bennington SU** which would better serve our students, families, and taxpayers. I am sure that other districts and towns are in similar situations and I am concerned that the current map's proposal doesn't account for towns like ours.

Letter to Officials:

To our elected officials,

In the town of Windham on March 3, 2026, the below articles pass unanimously at the annual town meeting:

ARTICLE 7:

Shall the Town of Windham declare that the current statewide education funding system has failed the people of Windham and is no longer capable of providing the equitable and convenient education guaranteed under the Vermont Constitution, and that repeated legislative inaction, including the flawed implementation of Act 73, has produced unsustainable property tax burdens that disproportionately harm small rural towns?

ARTICLE 8:

Shall the Town direct the Schoolboard to formally communicate this position to the Vermont Legislature and to notify state officials that Windham is prepared to explore all available legal and political avenues to protect its taxpayers and students unless meaningful, structural reform is enacted during the current legislative session?

We, the Windham District School Board, formally decided in an open meeting on 3/23/2026 to send the following information to the Vermont State House and beyond.

This vote asked the question: Is Vermont's system of education funding, including Act 73, working for the children and families of Windham?

Our collective view concerns whether our kids can get to school safely, have real choices, and learn in a fair system, as the Vermont Constitution promises.

In *Brigham v. State*, the VT Supreme Court found that our education funding system was unconstitutional. Why? Because it lets children's opportunities depend on how wealthy their town is.

The Court said education must be: Equitable and Accessible

Nearly 30 years later, Vermont spends some of the highest per-student amounts in the nation. Enrollment is down, student performance is slipping fast, and property taxes keep climbing. Higher spending should mean better outcomes and stable taxes. We, in Windham, have not seen this to be the case.

Windham is not a typical district:

- Our district does not operate an elementary school; we tuition students elsewhere
- Our middle and high schools are governed by the West River District
- We run our own school bus because the WCSU contractor will not serve our town due to geographic challenges
- Our student population is small with a quarter growth compared to prior year
- About half of our elementary students go to Townshend or Chester public schools, and half go to The Mountain School at Winhall, an independent school

On average, Windham residents, as a district, face some of the largest property tax increases in Vermont, despite being efficient and tuitioning. The statewide funding formula simply has not been effective for our town.

Act 73 – Promised to:

- Set a foundation funding formula

- Consolidate districts
- Reduce fragmentation
- Control long-term costs

What Windham has observed:

- Redistricting maps does not account for geography
- Consolidation plans are still unclear
- Current Tax relief depends on temporary surpluses, not real reform

● Major costs, such as health insurance, transportation, special education, are still unaddressed

For Windham, consolidation will:

- End elementary school tuition choice
- Threaten our school bus service
- Move governance to a multi-town board where Windham has little or no voice

Equity is not abstract—meaning kids can get to school. Right now, Windham School district guarantees transportation. Larger districts may not have the same luxury.

Currently there are Two Proposals

The House 27-District Map which:

- Collapses 119+ districts into 27
- Decisions are made by a large, multi-town board
- Windham loses elementary choice and transportation, with no guaranteed tax relief

Or the Senate Voluntary/Multi-Stage Plan:

- Starts with voluntary mergers, eventually 11 large districts
- Autonomy is only temporary, transportation is still at risk

- Neither plan protects local choice, or transportation. Neither plan supports local governance nor offers real, sustainable tax relief, but threatens to shift governance away from local decision-making.

What Our District would like to communicate to legislators:

- We are required to provide Equity and Access: Transportation is essential. Without it, equity fails.
- We value Choice and Community: Families need public and independent school options that work. Current Consolidation proposals prioritize large cookie cutter districts over local needs. Which would remove choice and force families to send students to far-flung schools in other towns.

- Case law has provided for Constitutional Guarantees: *Brigham v. State* promised real, enforceable equity. Neither plan safeguards it for Windham.
- We must convey to our elected officials our frustrations. Act 73, as it stands, continues to tax-out local property owners and continues to cause harm to Windham and Vermonters.

Our recent vote on both articles signals an intention to:

- Declare the current system has failed Windham
- Demand real equity, accountability, and reform
- Protect school choice, transportation, governance, and fair taxes

It does not withdraw Windham from the system or cancel funding. We would like to call for meaningful reform.

Our Board intends to contact our State Representatives and Senators advocating for:

- a. School choice for all of Windham's students - Pre-K through 12

- b. Real equity in funding
- c. Guaranteed transportation and school choice
- d. Tax relief tied to real structural reform, not temporary fixes

We are asking for real accountability, fairness, and a future where Windham has a voice.

We look forward to future discussions on how legislative actions will align with our community's values and support our students.

Thank you,

Windham School District Board

Abigail Pelton

Kate Fellows

Dan Roth