

## Testimony to the Vermont Senate Education Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Andrew Haas, and I am the Superintendent for the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union. I am here to share my perspective on the proposed consolidation maps and to strongly advocate for the power of voluntary collaboration through Supervisory Unions and Educational Service Agencies. As my board members know all too well, whatever governance model we ultimately have is only relevant if it benefits our students. Our focus with Act 73 tends to be on the cost savings. The truth is, larger districts or supervisory unions will most likely not lead to cost savings. So, I ask, "What is best for our students?"

Currently, our education system is operating under immense stress. In this climate, implementing forced mergers would be highly disruptive to our students, staff, and communities. I believe that voluntary mergers can be more effective than forced ones. When one of our neighboring districts was without a superintendent, I floated this exact idea. When mergers are approached voluntarily, and when they make financial and geographic sense in sparsely populated regions, combining like operators within a Supervisory Union (SU) can be very practical. Unfortunately, the current Conlon map eliminates the option for voluntarily merging.

Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, I believe, is a model for how Supervisory Unions can be both cost-effective and supportive of students. WNESU has one collective bargaining agreement for both its professional staff and support staff. We develop and support policies at the SU-level, while still allowing local districts to pass policies they deem important to their district. We have established a coordinated curriculum for all of our school districts as well. And, we have continually presented budgets to our taxpayers that are fiscally responsible.

Supervisory Unions are a vital structural component for rural Vermont, and I support their presence in rural regions.

- The current Conlon map does not include any supervisory unions.
- SUs work because they allow distinct rural communities to share administrative overhead while maintaining the localized programming that students rely on.
- Erasing these structures raises significant concerns about the proposed map and the new language introduced into the committee.

Instead of top-down consolidation, we should look toward collaborative models like Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) or Comprehensive Educational Service Areas (CESAs). Eight years ago when I came to WNESU as the Director of Student Services, I experienced the deficit of programming and high cost of Special Education services. Five years ago, I was a founding member on the Vermont Learning Collaborative board. We already have a successful, scalable model right here in Vermont. In January 2026, the Vermont Learning Collaborative (VTLC) officially launched as the state's first established BOCES.

The mission of a BOCES is to jointly conduct educational programs and services for member supervisory unions. This approach is designed to be cost-effective while increasing educational opportunities for children ages 3-22 and building staff capacity.

Through collaborative Educational Service Agencies (ESAs), districts experience tangible benefits:

- **Cost Savings in Staffing:** Supervisory Unions and districts can access part-time, full-time, or per diem positions to fill needs. This can save up to 50% or more per full-time equivalent (FTE) position.
- **Efficient Evaluation Services:** Utilizing a regional service provider like VTLC saves member districts 20% to 50% on evaluation services, with an average savings of 38%.
- **Reduced Transportation Fees:** By offering local, high-quality programming, districts can reduce their transportation fees by up to 85%.
- **Professional Development:** Districts utilizing VTLC as a regional provider saw an average savings of 66% on professional development compared to hosting events individually. Local and virtual hosting also saved on staff time and transportation costs.

Furthermore, ESA models provide broader responsive service abilities, greater capacity to hire high-quality staff, cooperative purchasing power, and essential grant administration. Nationally, ESAs are recognized as the infrastructure that enables school systems to operate efficiently and deliver high-quality services regardless of a student's ZIP code.

Forced consolidation overlooks the geographical realities of Vermont and dismantles the Supervisory Unions that rural communities rely on. I urge the committees to support the advancement of Act 73 through viable, scalable models like BOCES that foster efficiency without sacrificing local identities. Let us prioritize voluntary collaboration and shared resources over mandated disruption. And, let us continue to ask, "What is best for our students?"