

Bob Chutter

Senate Education Committee testimony Friday February 13, 2026

My name is Bob Chutter. I live in South Hero and am currently serving on the South Hero School District board and as the Chair of the Grand Isle Supervisory Union (GISU) board. With over 30 years in the community, almost 14 years of local school board service, and a career leading an R&D software engineering team that supports instrumentation and data analysis for medical research worldwide, I have a deep understanding of both complex systems and Vermont's school funding landscape. As a school board member I've worked through major shifts in Vermont education policy, Acts 60, 68, and now Acts 173 and 127, and I've seen how each change affects rural communities differently. I am also a citizen of the State of Vermont and know firsthand the affordability crisis that has developed over the last 10+ years.

Because our residents are geographically isolated and deeply connected to their local schools, preserving local decision-making is not just a preference, it is essential to ensuring our students have equitable access to education and our communities maintain democratic engagement. Grand Isle County takes education and affordability seriously. When Act 73 was proposed, our Supervisory Union and member Districts proactively engaged our communities and legislators through countywide and district public forums starting last April and continuing through the summer. We developed a thoughtful response that met both the spirit of Act 73 legislation and our aspirations for students. This work resulted in a shared resolution across all districts in the county to merge into a single District. The resolution also indicated we should reach out to potential partners in Franklin and Chittenden Counties to form a larger Supervisory Union. We did reach out and nobody wanted to partner with us. We want you, the legislature, to treat us as partners in this transformation because we are part of the solution. Our island community operates differently: from Colchester and Milton, Route 2 is the only southern entry to the County, and it exits into New York state near the Canadian border. Route 78 connects Alburgh in the north of Grand Isle County to Franklin County. See Fig 1. This geographical isolation must be considered in any governance change.

Our community believes the next step is further consolidation in our County and we want to stay together and not be divided up and parceled out. We've already closed two of the county's five schools and understand how to balance strong learning environments with responsible taxation. With about 900 students across three districts, and only K-8 schools in the county, we recommend merging our districts. We support consolidation of our three Districts into a single Supervisory District as proposed by Senator Beck in one governance mapping proposal. We would also support merging our three Districts into a single District and then joining a larger Supervisory Union. Even though our County-wide enrollment has been steady over the last 5-10 years, the statewide demographic points to a further decline in the student population. We can make tough choices to consolidate further within our County if that is what is required. We also believe strongly in a BOCES-style model to support regional services and cost efficiencies. This would be helpful in either of these two recommendations. We do not support the recent governance map proposed by Representative Conlon as it splits us in half. Splitting Grand Isle County in half ignores both our natural geographic boundaries and the social cohesion that allows our small

communities to operate effectively. Because we have already made responsible, often difficult local decisions, including closing local schools, we have demonstrated that we do not avoid hard choices.

In addition to the emerging governance proposals, which promise structural change, they do not address the biggest ongoing cost drivers: healthcare, special education costs, inflation, wages, and unfunded legislative mandates. Consolidation at the scale currently proposed will shift decisions away from rural counties like ours, increasing risk that small communities without a voice will be closed by larger centralized governance structures. Longer bus rides and loss of local voice are real fears, but so is parent engagement if schools are an hour drive away. One of the top 3 contributors to student success is when parents engage with their children's education. This important parent engagement factor will be reduced dramatically if schools are far away.

We are not asking the legislature to preserve the status quo. We are asking for a governance model that keeps decision-making grounded in the communities directly affected, respects the unique geography of our island county, and empowers us to continue implementing sustainable, student-centered solutions. Treat us as partners, not recipients, designing a system that works for rural Vermont.

Below is the resolution passed by the Grand Isle Supervisory Union Board and each of the three member Districts. This was forwarded to the Redistricting Committee for consideration.

Resolution Approved unanimously by the Grand Isle Supervisory Union Board:

Date: August 26, 2025

The Grand Isle Supervisory Union Board is committed to remaining in a supervisory union governance structure but as a newly combined unified union school district with our current members of Alburgh School District, South Hero School District and Champlain Islands Unified Union School District (Grand Isle, North Hero and Isle La Motte) and as part of a new larger governance region to the extent practical, under the terms of ACT 73 of 2025. The Grand Isle Supervisory Union School Board, which represents districts within the geographically isolated Grand Isle County, will reach out to neighboring and nearby school districts and supervisory unions to explore combining into a larger supervisory union.

Our primary purpose is to continue providing high quality education and excellent educational outcomes for our students by ensuring continued operation of our local K-8 Island schools and providing mainland high school options for our older students.

In addition to educational excellence, we prioritize local democratic engagement, oversight, and accountability at a cost Vermonters can afford.

The Board authorizes its Chair, Bob Chutter, to share this resolution with and reach out to mainland Vermont school districts and supervisory unions in proximity to Grand Isle County.

After consultation with potential future partners, The GISU looks forward to developing and sharing with the Redistricting Task Force for their consideration, a specific proposal for a new enlarged supervisory union governance structure in northwestern Vermont consistent with the standards in ACT 73 of 2025.

Fig 1: Map of Grand Isle County

