



**Testimony to Senate Education Committee
January 20, 2026
By Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)
Steering Committee Members
Cheryl Charles, Ph.D., Chair
Margaret MacLean
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

We are testifying on behalf of the Rural School Community Alliance. The RSCA currently represents members in more than 100 towns and villages in all regions of Vermont. These members are public school district and supervisory union boards, select boards, early childhood organizations and parent teacher groups who have voted to join the RSCA since January of 2025. As you know, the RSCA grew quickly out of a shared concern for protecting the integrity and vitality of educational opportunities for rural students throughout Vermont at a time when the specter of forced consolidations put them at great risk. The RSCA advocates for the importance of rural community public schools in Vermont **and** for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future.

RSCA members are clear that positive educational transformation in Vermont will not work by the state drawing and imposing lines on maps. Forced mergers in rural areas will not save money. They would increase costs, take years of time, and reduce the quality of services to students.

With that as background, we are here today to make the following key points.

- 1. Rural communities have demonstrated and will continue to show a willingness to save costs and improve educational quality, consistent with the needs and characteristics of rural communities, to meet the intent of Act 73. Holding down and reducing costs is a priority.**
- 2. We support the required implementation of a Cooperative Education Services Area (CESA) model throughout the state. Shared Service Models demonstrate cost savings as the track record of Supervisory Unions illustrates.**
- 3. We have concerns regarding Rural School Closure and Equity.**

Here is more detail in support of these key points.

Rural communities have demonstrated and will continue to show a willingness to save costs and improve educational quality, consistent with the needs and characteristics of rural communities, to meet the intent of Act 73.

RSCA acts as a voice for rural Vermont. The volunteer steering committee works closely with members to clarify and express their positions. After the passage of Act 73, we encouraged all member districts to read and discuss the law with their communities. As it was summer, this process took several months. Districts chose a variety of approaches including public forums, invitations to their legislators to explain the law, local community meetings, surveys and discussions at school board meetings. As a result of these public processes, **over 100 towns voted on motions to document their actions.** School boards made commitments to action steps including holding meetings with their neighbors, beginning conversations about forming shared service models or merging with their neighbors, and documenting their preferences for continuing to operate in a supervisory union. They sent documentation of their actions in the form of public comment to the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force.

Public comment was received from over 5,000 individuals and school boards. Their voices demonstrated NO support for the forced merger of school districts and NO consensus that a map is capable of leading

However, that does not mean school boards are fearful of change and unwilling to do their part. The public record demonstrates the willingness of rural school boards to partner with the state to find solutions. The conclusion: If Act 73 is to succeed, it can only do so in partnership with rural communities. If change is imposed against the wishes of the people, it signals failure before it has begun.

Here are excerpts from three examples.

They provided a particularly robust position paper that outlined the reasons they propose to stay in their current supervisory unions. They stated that, while “large-scale consolidation is not a viable option for our region, we are strongly supportive of a cooperative services framework modeled after the BOCES structure. Given our geography, scale and shared service history, we believe this model represents the most practical and equitable path forward for the Northeast Kingdom.”

Caledonia Cooperative School District

[illegible]

The GISU Board passed a resolution that included this statement, “Consolidating the existing three districts into a single Grand Isle County District and subsequently forming a larger supervisory union with mainland district partners aligns with the objectives of ACT 73 and the mandate of the Redistricting Task Force. This approach effectively addresses our geographic isolation and leverages established community connections to facilitate logistically viable local schools. “

In total, 26 school boards representing 100 towns passed motions expressing their preference to remain in a supervisory union.

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elected school boards are an asset and an essential component in translating Vermont's vision for the future into a lived reality.

Participatory democracy is not just a valued tradition in rural Vermont—it is a functional and effective system that enhances public education. Maintaining local governance structures through supervisory unions and local school districts helps ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of Vermont's children, families and communities at a local level. Rural school boards play a vital role in supporting schools, solving problems, and ensuring local effectiveness. Local school boards provide oversight and accountability. As the only directly elected members of our education system, their close connection to communities and voters is critical. They provide a locally informed, and essential, check and balance for the system. Supervisory union board members collaborate as equals, prioritizing the best interests of all students within the union. Their relational trust and cooperative approaches foster efficiency without sacrificing oversight. Rural school boards provide significant value at minimal cost, striking a necessary balance between regional efficiency and local responsiveness. At a time when democracy is fundamentally threatened in the US, local school boards working collaboratively in supervisory unions are beacons of hope and positive results.

Vermont's vision for the future of education has to be grounded in reality. We are a system built over time that has grown on rural terrain. Acknowledging and recognizing our history and geography is vital. We need to take our existing rural school system and move it forward while minimizing disruption to the lives of children, families, educators and whole communities. We need to get this right and avoid harm, particularly to our most vulnerable people and places.

We support the required implementation of a Cooperative Education Services Area (CESA) model throughout the state.

Comprehensive research supports redistricting from the ground up, not the top down. The state's role is to provide clear parameters, goals and expectations. The local role is to improve a functioning system in practice to achieve laudable and necessary goals.

Rejecting forced mergers and implementing Cooperative Education Service Area agencies means 1) prioritizing local elementary, central middle, and regional high schools while 2) gaining cost savings that provide better educational services, and 3) minimizing disruption, all goals of Act 73. This is a solid starting place that will demonstrate cost savings immediately, while laying the groundwork for additional efficiencies and possible voluntary mergers in the future.

Shared services models are currently in place in Vermont. A supervisory union is itself a tested and effective shared service model. Vermont-specific evidence from the AOE supports the position that supervisory unions are the most cost-effective structure to provide quality education and manage rising costs, especially in Vermont's rural areas. Cost-effectiveness, local accountability, community identity and retention of local knowledge are among the reasons that the RSCA strongly advocates for the continued role of supervisory unions as one of Vermont's preferred educational governance structures.

Legislation in Act 168 used the terminology of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), which is also a cooperative education services area (CESA) model. **One major change from what is specified in Act 168 is that the Redistricting Task Force recommends that all school districts and supervisory unions be members of a CESA.**

The RSCA supports that recommendation to require membership in a CESA. We do so because it does not dismantle current governance models but does achieve the goal of every district and supervisory union in the state participating in a thoughtful and proven structure for achieving efficiencies, cost savings, and improved services to children and youth. Mandatory participation in a shared services model still allows for selectivity in terms of which services are most relevant to each participating

member, with costs adjusted proportionately. We do recommend that districts and SUs be able to move from one CESA to another, if evidence supports doing so.

There is a misperception among some that CESAs create a new level of redundant administrative structure. CESAs do not add a new administrative tier. As stated in the Redistricting Task Force Final Report:

“CESAs do not add a new administrative tier. They replace the fragmented, undersized services now duplicated across 52 supervisory unions and districts . . . The CESA model consolidates only those functions that cannot be delivered efficiently or consistently at the local level. Regionalizing these shared, high-cost and low-frequency services—such as multidisciplinary evaluations, itinerant specialists, professional development, and business operations—creates scale where it matters, without altering school governance or local decision-making over instruction, staffing, or budgeting. Local districts continue to operate schools, set priorities, and retain all responsibilities for student learning and community engagement. CESAs serve as shared infrastructure, not a new governing body: they provide regional capacity that districts draw on, at cost, with transparent pricing, annual audits, and surplus refunds. In practice, CESAs function as a wholesale provider of specialized and technical services, allowing districts to redirect time and resources toward students rather than duplicating complex operations in parallel, reducing the need to increase spending.”

There are many benefits to this approach. As all school districts and supervisory unions become part of a CESA, they will not only see savings immediately in some areas, they will become accustomed to working together to find other ways to save while improving services. As more administrative services are coordinated and moved to a regional level, that in turn frees up local leadership to focus on instruction and educational quality. School district mergers do not result in cost savings. Regional coordination of shared services do.

Shared services models akin to CESAs are currently in place in Vermont. The first such model being developed under the auspices of Act 168 has been formed by neighboring supervisory unions and a school district in Southeast Vermont. Here is additional detail about the work currently underway.

Southeast Vermont Pilot

The Southeast Vermont BOCES proposal grew out of the work of the Vermont Learning Collaborative, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed to support collaboration among school systems in the southern part of the state, particularly north and south near the Connecticut River. The current executive director, Jill Graham, has extensive experience with the shared educational services model in Massachusetts as well as nationally. With the passage of Act 168, the school systems who had already been working together for years in the Vermont Learning Collaborative developed Articles of Agreement for a Southeast Vermont BOCES. They worked over many months, formally circulating the Articles in July of 2025. By December of 2025, all supervisory unions and school districts in the Collaborative had signed the Articles. That proposal for formal recognition as the first shared services cooperative developed under Act 168 was formally approved by the AOE in early January.

Here are examples of cost savings. This cost analysis compared services provided by the current regional education service provider (Vermont Learning Collaborative) to those of alternate providers used by our member Supervisory Unions and Districts. Data was provided by business office personnel regarding their expenses for comparative services. This analysis focuses on five current main areas of shared services: professional development, evaluation services, staffing services, consultation and programming.

Products & Services Provided	Cost Savings and Benefits for Members
<p>Professional Development Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>De-escalation training</i> • <i>Hazing/Harassment and Bullying Prevention and Intervention training</i> • <i>Special Education laws and regulations</i> • <i>Supporting students with mental health challenges</i> • <i>Classroom based Tier One interventions for students with mental health needs</i> 	<p>Supervisory unions and districts saved an average of 66 percent on professional development costs by using their regional service agency compared to individually hosting these events.</p> <p>Professional development was hosted locally or virtually saving staff time and transportation costs.</p>
<p>Evaluation Service Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Comprehensive Autism Evaluations</i> • <i>Psycho-educational evaluations</i> • <i>Speech and Language Evaluations</i> 	<p>By using their regional educational service agency, member supervisory unions' and districts' savings ranged from 20 - 50 percent on evaluation services yielding an average savings of 38 percent.</p> <p>No waiting lists were necessary; therefore, all evaluations were provided within special education compliance timelines. Providers are regionally localized thereby reducing travel time and associated costs compared to other providers.</p>
<p>Staffing Services Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Speech and Language Services</i> • <i>Board Certified Behavior Analyst</i> 	<p>In person services provided to student(s) in out of district settings ensuring free and appropriate education access for students.</p> <p>The regional service agency is able to hire and fulfill multiple part time FTE positions shared regionally across Supervisory Unions/Districts ensuring service needs are met and cost savings are reduced by up to 50 percent or more per FTE.</p>
<p>Supervisory union/District Consultation Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Program Review</i> • <i>Program Restructuring</i> 	<p>Accessing their regional educational service agency for supervisory union/district consultation saved members up to 62 percent in consultation fees. Services focused on increasing supervisory unions and districts' capacity to provide in-house programming for complex learners, with the goal of reducing reliance on outside placement services.</p>

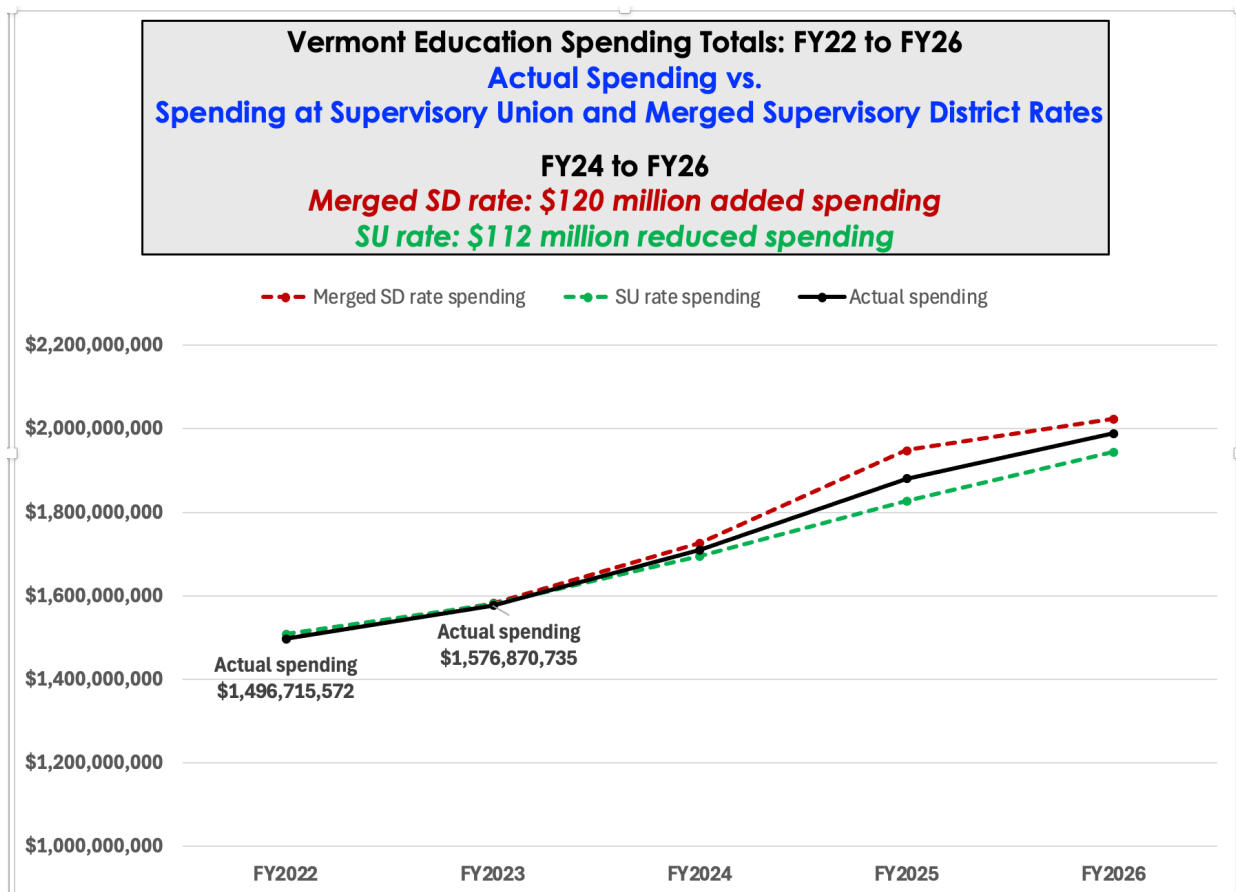
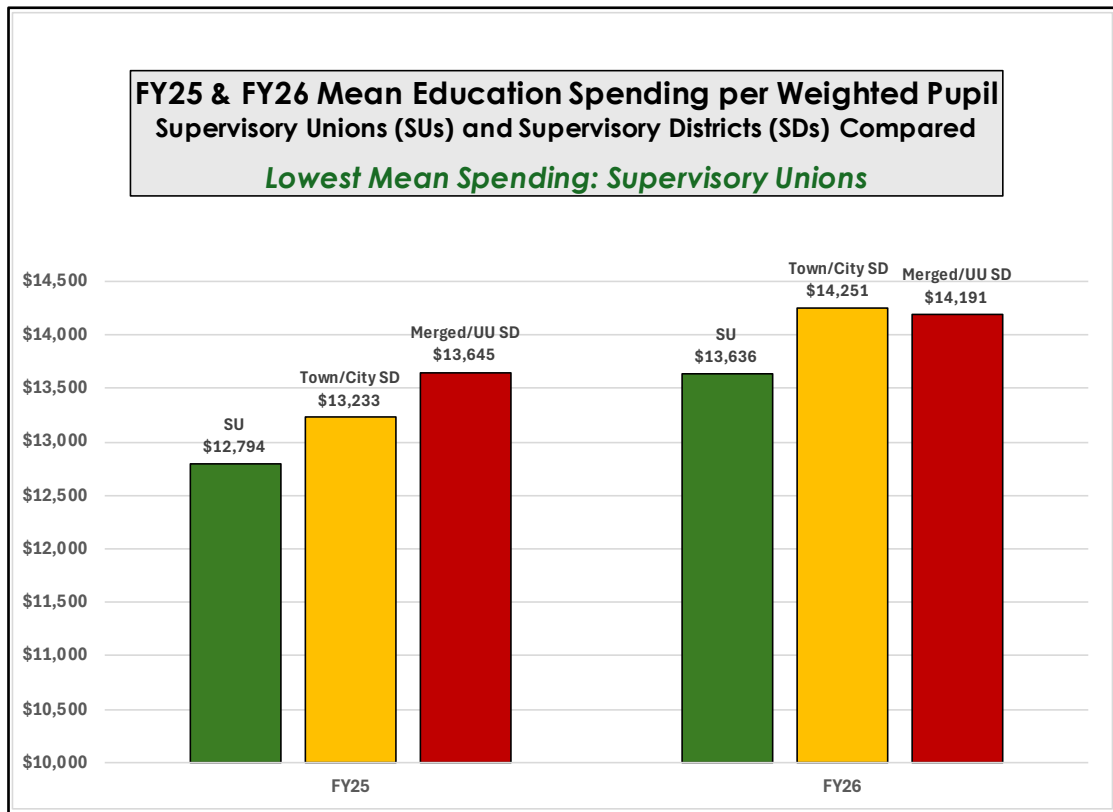
<p>Special Education Programming Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Elementary K - 6 Social Emotional Programming</i> 	<p>By partnering with their regional educational service agency, member supervisory union/districts are committing to local programming within their school settings thereby providing students access to a range of programming that includes the least restrictive setting. Currently, the southeastern area of Vermont has a severe lack of high quality therapeutic programming.</p> <p>The model of using the regional service agency allows for higher quality, closer to home programming for students, with a continuum of most to least restrictive settings to support students' growth and fulfilling the ultimate goal of returning to their home supervisory union/district. Anticipated average supervisory union/district savings for service fees and transportation are expected to be up to 85 percent of their current out of supervisory union/district expenses.</p>
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The members of this new CESA (BOCES) are Mountain Views Supervisory Union, Springfield School District, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union, Two Rivers Supervisory Union, Windham Central Supervisory Union, and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. According to AOE data, there are about 8000 students who will be served by this CESA.

As Chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union Board, I (Cheryl) signed the agreement on behalf of the WNESU. We are already seeing savings. The most substantial initial savings are in an area for which costs have grown dramatically in recent years: services for students with special needs. Sending students out of district to get the services they need, and are required by law, is more expensive than serving them within our supervisory union. However, many of these students need special expertise. It is a dramatic cost savings for us, for example, to have the CESA hire the specialists we need; then we share the cost on a pro rata basis as needed, rather than bearing the cost of a full-time employee.

Functioning CESAs statewide will not only create cost savings and efficiencies, they will help to re-balance the role of central offices and their leadership. They will help to refocus the role of superintendents on learning rather than management.

A supervisory union is a version of a shared services model. Here are charts that demonstrate their cost-effectiveness using Vermont Agency of Education Data.



Sources for charts: RSCA, based on AOE Data

As the charts displayed above indicate, supervisory unions have been an effective way for school districts in Vermont to reduce costs through shared services, and this is especially evident when compared to the merged, supervisory district model. The second chart shows projected differences between actual state education spending (black solid line) and state spending that would result from instead using per-pupil spending rates for supervisory unions (green dashed line) or merged supervisory districts (red dashed line) statewide. As noted, the projected total difference over the past few years is stark: a \$112 million *reduction* using the supervisory union rate, relative to actual education spending, versus an *increase* of \$120 million using the merged supervisory district rate. These data from Vermont provide strong evidence for pursuing an expanded shared services model, through the CESA framework.

We have concerns regarding Rural School Closure and Equity.

Current fiscal pressure along with declining enrollment has placed intense pressure on rural public schools: specifically, pressure to close them. Our rural schools and their communities are in the crosshairs of a number of policy levers designed to build pressure and force change. These policies act as blunt instruments, in contrast to careful targeted policy that supports adjustments while building on strengths.

Examples of such policies include:

- **Removing closure decisions from the communities that will be impacted by closure.** In large, state-imposed supervisory districts, decision-making about the operation of schools would no longer be at the local elementary level. School closure would be decided by regional boards elected by ward and could become primarily a monetary decision rather than an educational one, unless explicit guidelines ensure otherwise.
- **Defining schools as “necessary.”** Language is being crafted to define “necessary” rural schools which strips financial support deemed essential for an equitable education from rural children who live in sparse locations and attend small schools. If you are not deemed a “necessary” school, the assumption is you are superfluous and closure will follow.
- **Establishing class-size minimums with fixed numbers** rather than guidelines for size and staffing.
- **Not supporting sustainability planning.** Such planning is a key to the future of thriving rural public schools and is not prioritized or a part of the policy mix.

In this climate, accessibility to schools for families from communities with closed or closing schools becomes increasingly significant. We have regions of Vermont where public school capacity is already limited. Many sparsely populated rural locations do not offer public options for all grades, K-12. This will be exacerbated further when existing public schools close.

Many communities in Vermont are members of school districts that operate schools only in some grades, and some districts no longer have a local school in any of their member towns. As such public education deserts increase, access to schooling becomes arduous. Long bus rides rob children of the ability to access opportunities that may only await them at significant distance. In sparse towns of large square mileage with employment patterns in varied directions and great distances a factor, school choice fills a need to enable life to function for families when their local school no longer exists and busing to school is not provided. This has been the case historically. As rural schools closed, the tuition system evolved as a way to offer accessible schooling opportunities to rural children.

Act 73 reduced the number of independent schools able to receive public tuition. In doing so, the remaining schools approved to receive public money became even more vital options for rural children living in regions that lack public school capacity. School choice, both public and independent, offers varied robust opportunities in sparse areas of our state and makes an important contribution to the educational landscape of rural Vermont. With public school closures, their significance increases in importance. Public comment on this topic overwhelmingly reiterated the importance of school choice to rural families particularly when public schools are closed.

Choice equals access for children and their families living in rural Vermont. School choice can be a pathway to equity of opportunity for a child from a rural town whose school has closed. From a rural perspective, approved independent schools that qualify for public support through tuition add educational system capacity. Many rural Vermonters see them as valued partners that increase the chance for all students to have access to a school that offers opportunities to meet their needs.

CONCLUSION

To close:

(1) Vermonters are nowhere near any kind of consensus on a statewide map of school districts and are strongly opposed to forced mergers. Trying to get voters to accept forced mergers into overly large school districts would take at least 1.5 to 2 years, would not reduce costs, and would lose even more trust and acceptance of voters.

(2) In order for change in our education system to be successful, it must be organic. The RSCA grew very quickly, because the Alliance reflects the reality on the ground in rural areas of Vermont.

(3) We encourage action in the short term to hold down costs, possibly with some kind of flexible spending cap, while the cooperative service models get up and running. If you can hold down the rate of increase, the rest can happen organically within districts and will result in cost savings and improved services to Vermont's students.

We are happy to respond to questions as well as to provide additional information and testimony in specific areas of interest.