



Testimony to Senate Education Committee
February 24, 2026
By Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)
Steering Committee Members
Cheryl Charles, Ph.D., Chair
Jeanne Albert, Ph.D.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We appreciate being able to testify again to this Committee on behalf of the Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA). I, Cheryl Charles, am chair of the Town of Westminster School Board, chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union Board, and chair of the Steering Committee for the Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA). Dr. Albert is chair of the Lincoln School District Board and a member of the RSCA Steering Committee.

Before we get into the specifics of our testimony today, we want to thank you for actively seeking out and authentically listening to many voices, including those of rural Vermont. You have done so in seeking testimony, and in your road trips last summer and fall. And you create a welcoming environment, which is deeply appreciated.

We have been asked to offer testimony about the proposed school governance map and associated proposal you are considering.

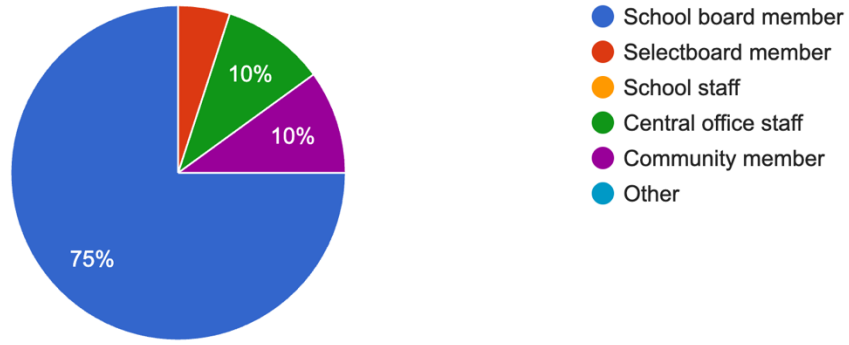
Before we do so, we would like quickly to reiterate major points you have heard from us previously, because they are relevant to your consideration of the map and proposal.

- There is no evidence that forced mergers into larger supervisory school districts will save money or improve educational outcomes.
- Research and Vermont evidence *does* support savings and other benefits from voluntary mergers and shared service models, including supervisory unions.
- Cooperative education service areas (CESAs or BOCES) can be implemented statewide in Vermont as a way to achieve cost-savings and efficiencies quickly.
- Supervisory unions demonstrate cost-savings and improved educational quality while maintaining community vitality and democratic values, especially in rural Vermont.
- Supervisory unions are the most educationally-sound and cost-effective governance model for most of rural Vermont.
- Speaking especially for rural Vermonters, school closures should require a vote of the townspeople.

So, while we don't support any form of forced merger, we commend you for making supervisory unions an essential element of the map you are considering, as well as including voluntary mergers in your process.

Knowing that maps are being considered both in your Committee and in the House Committee on Education, the RSCA quickly developed and disseminated a survey to our members to get their feedback. Here is a high-level summary of their responses, submitted from Friday afternoon, February 20 through yesterday, February 23. We could provide more detail within the week; however, where specific changes to your map are suggested, we recommend you hear directly from the school boards and others in those towns.

Role
20 responses

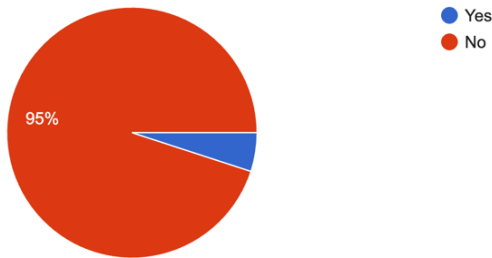


Responses were received primarily from school board members as you can see in this chart.

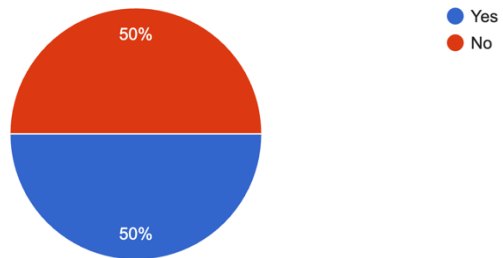
We heard from the following districts and supervisory unions:

Caledonia Central SU, Caledonia Cooperative School District, Canaan School District, Essex North SU, Lamoille South SU, Ludlow-Mount Holly School District, Missisquoi Valley School District, Mount Abraham Unified School District, Mountain View Union Elementary School District, Mountain Views SU, Orleans Southwest SU, South Hero/Grand Isle SU, Strafford School District, Swanton School District, Wells Spring Unified Union District, Westminster School District, Windham Northeast SU, and White River Valley SU.

As shown below at left, just one of the 20 survey respondents supported the House Map, versus 10 out of 20 for the Senate Map.



RSCA survey: Support for House Map



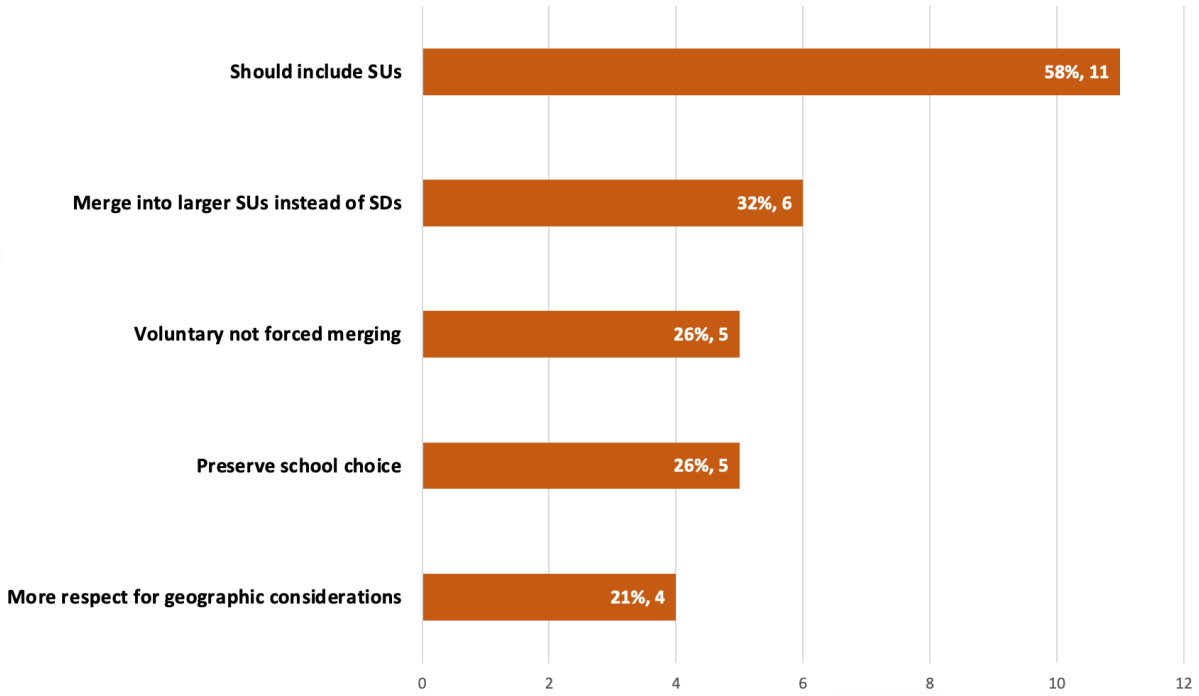
RSCA survey: Support for Senate Map

In the survey we also asked respondents who did not support a map to indicate how that map could be made acceptable. The top responses are summarized in the charts below.

How would the **House map have to change to be acceptable?**

Top responses from the 19 participants who did not support the House map

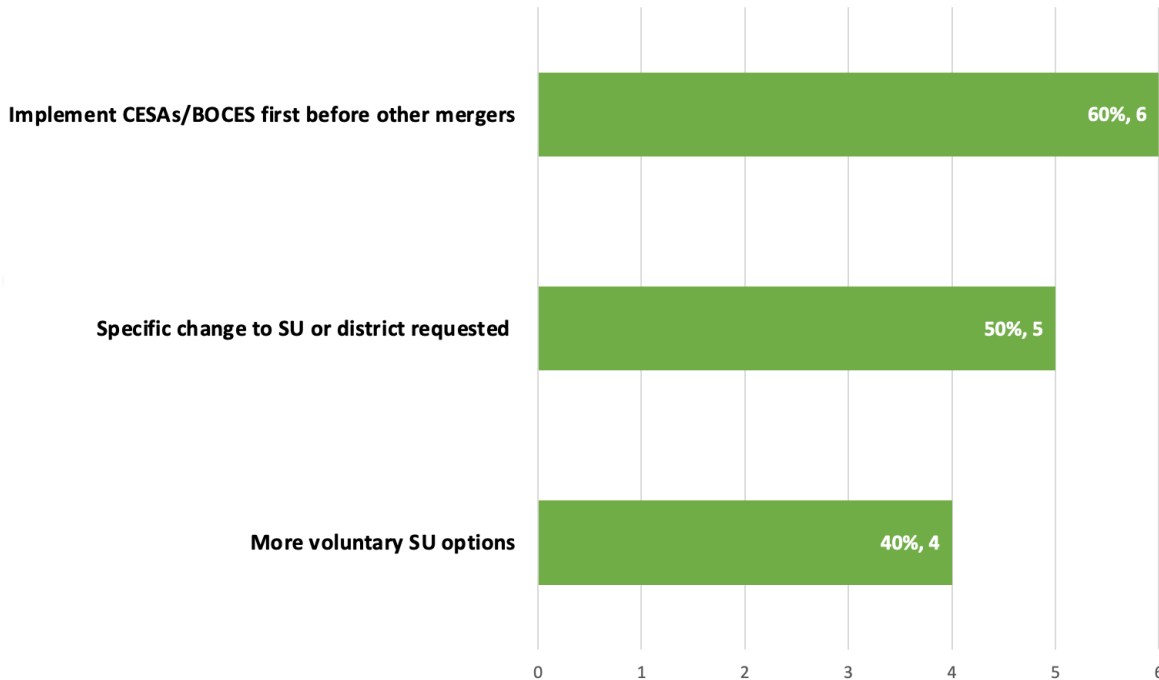
Free response question



How would the **Senate map have to change to be acceptable?**

Top responses from the 10 participants who did not support the Senate map

Free response question



Finally, we also asked survey participants to provide additional (optional) feedback regarding either map and about Vermont education reform in general. The major themes included:

- Adequate time needed for planning with new partners
- Support for the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force recommendations
- The need for financial and student outcome analysis before enacting major change
- Addressing major cost drivers, including health insurance, mental health, transportation
- Respecting current articles of agreement; allowing local development of new ones (not imposed)

With all of this as background, **there is no question that the Senate map is far preferable to Vermonters representing rural communities.** Given that this comparative preference is largely driven (along with the inclusion of supervisory unions) by the focus on voluntary mergers, we offer a few comments about this critically important element.

Importance of voluntary versus forced district mergers

A steadfast commitment to change through **voluntary** mergers is essential. Research on school district mergers confirms that forced or coerced mergers are much less likely to succeed, in large part because voluntary mergers build sufficient trust and respect to withstand the uncertainty, disagreements, challenging decisions, and disruption that change inevitably brings. *Minimizing disruption is especially important in the realm of education, where children often bear the negative consequences of change made without such trust.*

In Vermont, prior experiences of forced school district mergers have left many communities with added wariness, even in the face of reassurances that voluntary truly means voluntary. Vermonters are ready to solve problems together, but care must be taken to develop processes for change that are driven by evidence and include authentic opportunities for feedback and improvements based on local knowledge.

Recommended principles for voluntary change

- Districts that merge voluntarily will not be required to undertake further mergers.
- Only like-operating districts may merge.
- Only contiguous districts may merge.
- Special review is needed for a proposed merger of districts that vary greatly in size.
- An appeals process should be available for towns in merged districts where further merging is proposed, to allow for potentially different voluntary associations.

Preliminary Timeline

While not definitive, we have provided a timeline for your consideration that could serve in combination with any map that you may propose (see last page.)

CONCLUSION

(1) ***Vermonters are strongly opposed to forced mergers, as evidenced by public engagement with the Redistricting Task Force.*** Therefore, you are on solid ground by taking a voluntary approach to mergers over time.

(2) ***The merged supervisory district model has not produced cost savings, compared to multi-member supervisory unions.*** Once again, you are on solid ground by creating an approach—even a map—that depends on supervisory unions as well as supervisory districts. Especially in rural areas where large geographic area and sparse population makes them impractical and even harmful, it makes sense to “achieve scale” via a combination of supervisory unions and BOCES or CESAs, with their proven record of cost effectiveness both nationally and specifically in Vermont.

(3) ***Cost sharing through CESAs and potentially larger supervisory unions will likely suggest further voluntary merger opportunities,*** after local management of administrative and other services

has been greatly reduced. During this phase, the state could facilitate merger conversations between SU/SD neighbors, with expanded high school and CTE opportunities a priority.

(4) For rural districts that don't operate in some or all grades, it is important that they remain members of supervisory unions. Non-operating districts are important to towns by allowing families to find the best fit for their children's and their own overall needs, provide a safeguard for the future should enrollments' once again grow, and allow continued local oversight for the quality of education and its cost to serve their students.

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

Year 1: July 1, 2026 to June 30, 2027	
July 1, 2026	<p>Enactment of preliminary statewide map of Cooperative Education Service Areas (CESAs) and BOCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boundaries are established by the state based on existing regional collaborations, with realignment possible (see below).
July 1, 2026 to Dec. 31, 2026	<p>State Board of Education directs Agency of Education to develop standard guidelines for SUs and SDs to implement foundational data analysis program.</p> <p>Goals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying effective practices Understanding statewide variation in spending and outcomes Identifying beneficial opportunities for shared services
	<p>Independent comprehensive performance review and capacity evaluation of the Vermont Agency of Education</p> <p>Goals include: identifying critically needed staff and programs to support foundational data analysis program and effective monitoring</p>
Jan. 1, 2027 to June 30, 2027	<p>SUs and SDs implement foundational data analysis program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by AOE Goal: establish a foundation for a research-based, data-driven, evaluative process.
	<p>CESAs take initial steps toward adopting shared service contracts</p> <p>AOE supports new CESAs in evaluating potential shared services and contracts, via workshops, consultation, and information sharing from established cooperatives.</p>
	<p>Educational monitoring systems developed</p> <p>For continued district and SU evaluation and review, including sustainability planning for districts experiencing enrollment instability or decline</p>
Year 2: July 1, 2027 to June 30, 2028	
July 1, 2027 to Dec. 31, 2027	<p>SUs and SDs review data analysis</p> <p>Goals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determining best options to achieve increased efficiencies, cost savings, and improved educational outcomes in preliminary CESA placement Identify potential realignment of CESA boundaries, as warranted
	<p>Review of preliminary (CESAs) and BOCES and potential realigned boundaries</p> <p>Initial review and continued identification of shared services</p>
	<p>Preliminary identification of voluntary mergers at district and SU level</p> <p>Goal: identify whether program sharing through CESAs could allow for merger opportunities at SU and/or district level</p>
Jan. 1, 2028 to June 30, 2028	<p>Final review of CESA boundaries</p>
	<p>Continue identification of voluntary mergers at district and SU level</p> <p>Provide school construction incentives with priority for strategic mergers and collaboratives that expand high school and CTE access and quality.</p>
	<p>Implement Professional Judgement Panels to provide guidance and refinement of funding formula</p> <p>Goals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use data and analysis, site visits, etc., to inform funding formula impacts on SUs and SDs Identify adjustments to formula or funding changes needed before implementation.