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Testimony, Elaine Collins
Senate Ed Committee

Hello,

For the record, I am Elaine Collins, and I'm in my fourth year as the superintendent of North Country Supervisory Union in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, my 15th as a school administrator, and 36th year working in Northeast Kingdom Schools. The 14 towns in my supervisory union are Brighton, Charleston, Coventry, Derby, Holland, Jay, Lowell, Morgan, Newport City, Newport Town, Troy and Westfield. We range about 65 miles from one end to another and have 520 square miles. We have approximately 2630 students in NCSU.

First, please bear with me as I set some context for my comments, because as you know, context matters. I know you all know these things, but I want to remind us of what our current reality is.

In the Governor's budget address, he spoke about the increased effects of housing insecurities, drug addiction, mental health challenges, criminal offenders and a lack of accountability. I would ask all of you to consider that many Vermonters who are experiencing these issues may also have children who attend our schools. If you are a child whose parents struggle with mental health, drug addiction, and violence, you will likely have more challenges in school than a more typically developing child who isn't exposed to those difficulties. Do the children of these folks need more? Obviously yes. Do they deserve to realize their potential and possibilities? Also, obviously yes.

If we consider that our state's children are one of our most vulnerable populations, then I would ask us to think about them as the canaries in the coal mine of the State of Vermont, or an indication that the environment itself may need some adjustments. To provide lasting, sustainable change, I believe we must change the environment to better support the children. In my 36 years as an educator and educational leader, things have changed. Whenever there are significant changes in a society, there are impacts on the society's children. This hasn't happened all at once, but slowly over time. It's a little bit like boiling a frog alive – if you keep turning up the heat a little at a time, the frog doesn't notice until it's at a crisis point. That's where we are now in education.

There are several things that I would ask you to think about:

1. About two decades ago, in the Northeast Kingdom at least, the community resources started to dry up. Our designated agency and other organizations started losing the ability to provide for the needs of our children and families. Currently, we have wait lists for family supports as long as 18 months, even for students with significant mental health concerns that may require hospitalization. So schools quietly began providing more mental health supports. At a cost.

2. Housing shortages have been around since before COVID, but were certainly exacerbated by it. Think about a few of our NCSU students who, earlier this fall, were living in tents. Or are currently living in a shed without electricity, reliable heat, or any degree of insulation. It's pretty cold out this week. Imagine being a child who lives in these circumstances and shows up at school. Aside from needing basic needs to be met, is this child as ready to learn as their classmate, who isn't worried about staying warm or being hungry? Our schools provide for basic needs because it's the right thing to do, but also because that student is not going to learn if we don't. As local resources to help with housing began to shrink, schools began doing this work. At a cost.
3. Food insecurity is a real issue for many of our families and children. Schools provide food at breakfast, lunch, sometimes supper, and weekends for many students. Of course, students can't learn if they're hungry and morally, it is absolutely the right thing to do for our kids. But it comes at a cost.
4. Substance abuse and addiction has been steadily increasing in almost every town in every part of Vermont. Without options to treat addiction, communities do their best, but often drug use and abuse is rampant and unmanageable. Imagine the child who has one or more parents or caregivers who struggle with this issue, and may not be able to hold down a job or provide for basic necessities for their family. Who in the community helps the children to cope? Who in the community provides for the needs of the children? In many cases, it's the school. At a cost.
5. As more and more of our young people have challenging histories, we have more students who are struggling with safe boundaries and emotional regulation. As they get older, they may enter the juvenile justice system. The governor spoke about accountability for young juvenile offenders. More and more students require hospitalization and other restrictive environments to help keep them safe for themselves and others. Our schools are still required to provide an education for these students too. Not just at a cost, but at an increased cost because of the safety and security needs in these situations.
6. All these factors contribute to students, including many very young children, who are increasingly dysregulated in school. We have had to send at least 7 students to alternative day treatment schools this school year. And the causes for this are not insignificant: punching adults in the face, causing employees concussions, kicking, spitting. Additionally, many more of our young children are in elementary schools with toileting needs, requiring schools to hire LNAs or more nursing staff to accommodate those needs. The increased need for behavioral interventionists, behavior specialists, and other supports are necessary to keep students and others safe in the classroom. My sense is that in areas of the state where community resources are at an all-time low, the need for behavioral interventions are at an all-time high because the root cause is not a school issue, but instead a need for increased supports in the family structure. And this comes at a cost.

The picture I'm painting is the current reality in our schools. It's hard to imagine that our schools have become more like social service agencies, but that's where we are.

Additionally, I'll remind us about the at least some of the unfunded mandates that have impacted the costs of education.

- A. Universal PreK: in NCSU, every school has at least one preschool teacher and one preschool aide added into their budget. In some larger schools, there are up to three preschool teachers and three preschool aides. Additionally, we have an SU-level early childhood coordinator, special educators, and special education aides that are deployed to all our schools. Then we pay approximately \$4,000 per student for tuition to other outside approved programs. Preschool students count as .46 of a student and there is no special education block grant for preschoolers with special education needs, even though we not only serve special education needs in our schools, but also in private programs and in the child's home. The local budgets absorb these costs. I will never tell you that investing in our youngest students is not a good investment or that we shouldn't do it. But it comes at a cost.
- B. Dual Enrollment: we are funding college courses for high school students. This is a great idea and allows many students the opportunity to get into the work force earlier and with more skills. It gives our students a real advantage. And it comes at a cost.
- C. PCBs: at the end of this school year, we will have spent approximately \$9.2 million dollars in NCSU for PCB mitigation, \$8.7 million in the high school alone.

I've heard repeatedly that schools are spending too much on educating too few students. I agree. I agree that we need to become more efficient and that there are likely cost containment measures that can be realized with some systemic change. I'm just bringing our attention to why we may have gotten to where we are currently, and perhaps to shift the narrative from one of blaming education for spending too much and more to understanding why we are spending too much so that we can make some changes. Over the last two decades or so, we've been boiling the frog alive.

Now to the questions that you would like my perspective about.

The consolidation of districts or supervisory unions at the superintendent's level is certainly possible. You're the General Assembly, you could make it happen. Please keep in mind that central office costs are about 5 – 10% of the overall spending picture in the entire state, which won't have a significant impact on spending. The devil is always in the details and although these redistricting maps can likely be determined during this session, the logistics will take more consideration. The hybrid map that the secretary proposed was a combination of the VSBA regions and a comprehensive regional high school approach. The VSBA region for the Northeast would encompass 1241 square miles, 35 towns, and 19 schools. Although the VSBA regions are long-established, from a superintendent's perspective, it's too large to be practical in our area. The longest stretch from school to school in this region would be from Jay to Canaan, about 1 hour 39 minutes with no

weather or traffic. At North Country Union High School, on the first day of school, we had a credible bomb threat and had to evacuate. The superintendent has a duty to be a part of the command post that law enforcement establishes and to communicate with the community. If I had been over an hour and a half away, I'm not sure how I could have managed that situation effectively.

Last year, we added an assistant superintendent to our SU, thank God. Just last year, we saw PCBs in the high school and educating 720 students in tents, a principal who left in October in one of our schools requiring at least two days a week on site for both the assistant superintendent and me, at least 20 student hearings, and negotiating both support staff and certified staff contracts – I simply wouldn't have made it without help. With another 1300 students and eight more schools, we would need more assistant superintendents – and likely more folks in central office to manage the financial systems, personnel, special education, early childhood, technology, and curriculum. Whose Collective Bargaining Agreement would we follow? We likely won't level down to the lowest paid contract, which means increased personnel costs. Who determines seniority? Whose financial system will be used? NCSU shifted financial systems last year and it cost our district over \$200,000, just for the software, training, and overtime to implement the new system. How much would transitioning 19 schools and 35 towns to a different system cost?

With PCBs at North Country Union High School, there is both a challenge and an opportunity. The building is 60 years old and has outlived the life expectancy for all its major systems. Having spent \$8.7 million in PCB mitigation hasn't changed the fact that we are likely going to have to rebuild the high school to get rid of PCB contamination. If we feel that a newly constructed regional high school is the best way to accomplish this for North Country, then perhaps we think about more than just NCSU students attending and consider whether Lake Region Union High School and North Country Union High School become one. We would absolutely need state aid for school construction to make this a reality, a process for what that would look like, and lots of support from others, but perhaps it's an opportunity for that kind of collaboration.

The CTE district model that Senator Beck presented seems more convoluted because of the changing structures of governance. Having PreK – 6 schools next to PreK – 8 schools but in different districts wouldn't seem to make sense to me and would be harder to manage. Generally, the bigger and more complex the system, the bigger the bureaucracy to manage it – which doesn't save money. Another point about access to CTE centers is that simply redistricting won't change access for us. It will take a real investment of resources. We have a good program at North Country Career Center. Our welding program is a prime example of my point: we always have a waiting list, but it would take about \$250,000 to create another welding classroom. So it's not only about access, it's also about infrastructure. Would it be good for students? Absolutely. But in the current funding structure, there isn't the money for this and making a large investment certainly wouldn't save money in the short-term.

As to supervisory union vs. supervisory district: as with most things, there are positives and negatives with both models. As a supervisory union, we have strong representation from each of our towns, active boards, and schools at the heart of their rural communities. We are cost effective, with most of our schools falling well below or near the state average for spending. We provide supports at the SU level that smaller schools couldn't afford on their own. There is voice and choice in this model. Our central office costs \$22.8 million to run, but we only assess back \$8.3 million to schools because of grants and other funding sources. On the flip side, there are also 15 boards, 63 board members, and 17 board meetings a month. Is it possible to keep North Country as one and make it a supervisory district? Certainly. We are used to working together and have trusted relationships with each other. There is greater flexibility in a district model to move students and staff. In some of our smaller schools that have classes of 4 students, being able to reconfigure schools into a different model and maximize staff would help with this. However, the absolute necessity in this model is that there is still direct representation from communities in a supervisory district model. With a voice and the ability to advocate for their communities, this is a model that more people would be willing to follow. Voting wards in mega-districts without direct representation will not go over well in our communities and flies in the face of who we are as Vermonters.

My suggestions for a path forward. I believe you should consider a multi-faceted approach:

1. Consider why we are thinking about district consolidation and think about how to maximize efficiencies. If there's no evidence to show that mega-districts will save money, why are we considering this? Senator Beck said it yesterday: there is no cost savings in Act 73. Jay Nichols provided some testimony on this yesterday and I agreed with many of his points. Reducing the number of districts to fewer but not so few that it creates greater bureaucracy seems more reasonable and manageable, and people who are used to working together continue to work together. This allows for real change to happen on a manageable scale.
2. Allow districts a limited amount of time to create incentivized, voluntary mergers, either for services or for districts. For NCSU, with our increased need for alternative day treatment programs, there is an opportunity to work with OCSU or others to create our own program and save real money more quickly. After a defined amount of time, you may have to re-evaluate whether efficiency has been achieved through this voluntary process.
3. Reinstitute state aid for school construction. There are no schools in NCSU that could take on the students from another school. That means construction costs, which won't save money in the short-term. Sometimes closing two schools to reopen one larger one may not be practical in terms of transportation for students. In Morgan and Holland, our communities voted to close their small schools and send their elementary students to Derby Elementary School. This makes for a very long day for some of our very young students, who travel about 75 - 80 minutes one

way to school every day. It sounds good from afar to say let's close schools and consolidate, until the reality of really young students on the bus for approximately 2.5 hours a day hits closer to home. That's why it's important to make sure that our contexts are heard in these conversations. The devil is in the details, and only people who live and serve in the rural context can tell you about the details and how they might affect students. And in terms of savings on their tax rate? Holland is seeing a significant increase in their tax rate this year (19 cents) – because of CLA impacts – even though they only pay tuition and don't have a building to maintain.

4. Think about unfunded mandates and the “extra” work of schools: how do we pay for these things? Do we continue to pay for these things? We may have to prioritize.
5. Take steps to address cost drivers: a family health insurance plan now costs \$42,000, almost as much as a first-year teacher. Health insurance has increased 125% in the last 8 years. This is real money in our schools and is absolutely beyond our control.
6. Model, model, model: this plan has been thin on details and has asked everyone to accept on face value that this will save money, provide efficiencies, and be better for students, but at this point there is no data to support these conclusions. We must have data to support the decisions that we are making. Making change for change's sake won't make a lot of sense if it ends up with a less efficient system in the end – and even worse – higher property taxes. Use JFO to model what it looks like for making some of these changes to see if cost containment can be realized. What are the real transition costs? What are the efficiencies that will be realized and how will that affect costs?
7. Finally, please work with us instead of against us. Publicly berating schools because they perform necessary and important work that is well beyond the scope of providing for the academic needs of our students and then blaming us for spending too much is unfair and demoralizing. We know we are spending a lot of money and the tension between our communities and our schools is unsustainable. It continues to be a heavy weight for administrators and school boards. We want change too – and we have practical experience and information that will be important for you to know as we implement change. Please work with us.