

**Vermont Senate
Senate Education Committees**

**Testimony of Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, White River
Valley Supervisory Union**

My name is Jamie Kinnarney, and I serve as the Superintendent of Schools of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. I will refer to our supervisory union as the WRVSU for the remainder of my testimony. I am now in the midst of my sixth year as Superintendent of Schools at WRVSU, and previously served as Principal for seven years at the Williamstown schools. This marks my fifteenth year as an education administrator in Vermont. As aforementioned, the WRVSU serves approximately 1,700 students across ten towns and three counties (Addison, Orange, and Windsor).

I want to thank the Senate Education Committee for allowing me the opportunity to testify today on Act 73, with specific focus on the school redistricting maps that have been proposed by Secretary Saunders late last week.

I want to begin my testimony by thanking you for your continued consideration and support of the supervisory union system as a viable governance structure for Vermont's schools. I've testified previously about why I strongly support the Supervisory Union (SU) structure, and once again need to emphasize that my reasoning for this strong and unconditional support of the Supervisory Union school governance structure is grounded in my core belief of transforming education. Vermont deserves systems that best serve our students, communities, and provide the best possible Road Map to strengthen our schools, while also increasing student achievement both socially/emotionally and academically. I will share Vermont-specific data that supports the fact that multi-district Supervisory Unions have demonstrated more fiscal efficiency over the past several years as compared to single-town and multi-town supervisory districts. In addition, the Supervisory Union governance structure preserves local democracy and enhances school accountability through the preservation of local school district Boards.

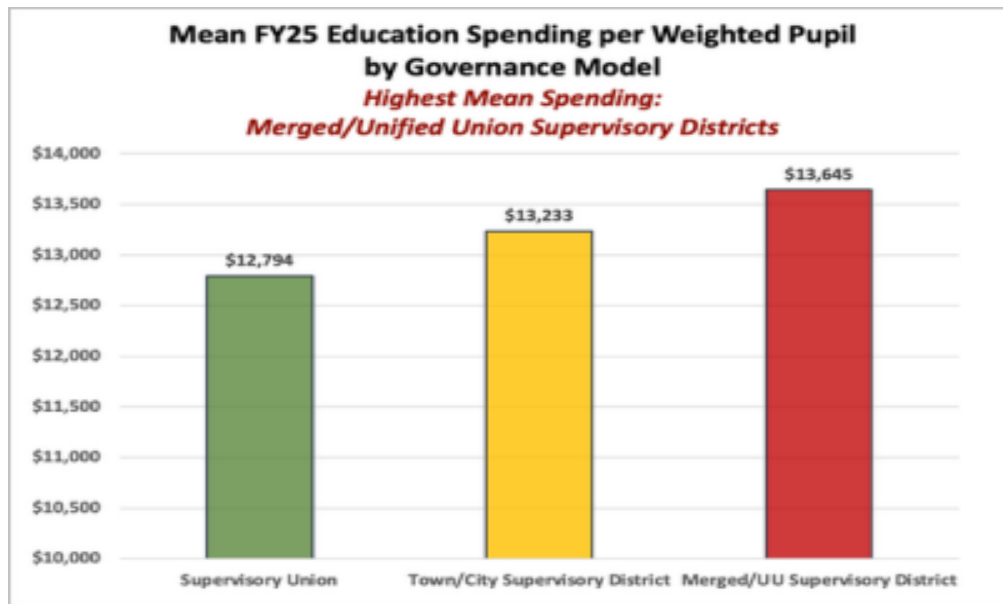


Chart by the Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA) based on Vermont Agency of Education data.

Therefore, my immediate reaction to Secretary Saunders' maps is one of immediate and grave concern due to the fact that they do not include the Supervisory Union structure as a means of future school governance. Instead, the secretaries' proposed maps rely on the Supervisory District Governance Structure, which will immediately strip away any/all local democracy, oversight, and accountability. In addition, it will result in proposed Supervisory District Boards that are depersonalized to Vermont students. I have no idea how a Board member from Hancock is supposed to have any on-the-ground feel, knowledge, or perspective on how a school is performing or meeting the needs of the students, families, and community served in Springfield, as would be the case in the VSBA Hybrid Map introduced last Thursday, January 15th.

I want to be very clear, I believe that the talk of SUs vs. SDs is being misconstrued because it is unfolding with a primary focus as a means to end school choice. I believe school choice and rural Vermont are intertwined often because rural districts either have stopped operating schools or have non-operating grades due to the difficult decision to close their operating grades/schools due to requirements faced during Act 46, as well as the reality of declining enrollment. **These decisions were, however, made with the best of intentions to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible to best meet the needs of local students and communities.**

The discussion that we need to have right now is about a unilateral move to large multi-town and county Supervisory Districts like the ones proposed by Secretary Saunders, which would place WRVSU in a Supervisory District that has thirty towns and forces the unilateral top-down merger of seven SUs and SDs into just a single SD.

As I've stated to you all before, I believe that move is one to de-personalize decision making and make it easier for these newly elected Boards to close schools. It also takes all local decision-making from the electorate and places that decision-making in the hands of these newly elected de-personalized Boards. In addition, it strips away the role that local school boards, districts, and communities I serve play in regard to keeping school systems accountable. We need to increase school accountability, not weaken it by taking away the accountability measures closest to Vermont's students. The level of satisfaction our local communities are able to convey through the tools provided to them by locally elected school district Boards is critically important.

As a pivot, I also want to be very clear, a Supervisory District that goes from Granville to Springfield Vermont all the way north through Chelsea and Norwich isn't going to allow for a Superintendent to serve as an instructional leader. That position will quickly become disconnected from the day-to-day realities of their schools and rely on highly paid middle management and bureaucracy to get their work done. That's not a vision of educational transformation that I can support.

Hence, my recommendation is that you no longer entertain the three maps proposed by Secretary Saunders last week and move back to a focused effort on transforming our educational system through the strongly researched policies previously provided to you via the use of the **Cooperative Educational Service Areas**, and by requesting all SUs or SDs work cooperatively and collaboratively to partner through voluntary school governance restructuring as already provided under current law (**with an actionable deadline to be determined this legislative session**).

If you were to require all SUs or SDs to find one partner at the Supervisory Union/Supervisory District level to merge with then it would result in a decrease of SUs/SDs from 52 to 26. I firmly believe that if required the field would actually find more efficiency and get that number down to the lower twenties or even high teens. It would also allow for the needed time to research which governance structure makes the most sense for that region, research the impact of cost drivers like the merger of collective bargaining agreements, and result in the reduction of redundancy at the supervisory union/district level without necessarily requiring loss of local democratic control/oversight because the Supervisory Union model of governance could be enacted voluntarily by any/all Boards.

I am also confident that this approach would ensure necessary safeguards are in place so Vermont's students do not fall through the cracks or get lost in any of our education transformation efforts. We need to provide stability and predictability to our ever changing education system, not transformational efforts which will result in our educational leaders' focus being diverted away from student learning and achievement.

I promise you that SDs with thirty towns that result in nearly a two hour car drive to get to one end of its border to the other isn't going to deliver on the promise of school transformation, which is focused on increasing academic and social/emotional outcomes. Instead, it will be focused on trying to soothe the pain of upset and hurt communities. Resulting in greater time spent on management and significantly less time spent on instructional leadership, where it continues to be needed most.

I want to also emphasize that I am completely supportive of a change in the education funding formula and believe that our current funding formula consists of too many variables to provide predictable tax rates year-to-year. This is in large part due to the complexity and variety of variables that play a role in the finalized residential tax rate. To this end, I believe that the legislature should continue to study, analyze, and work to fix the funding formula with increased research and attention specific to the foundation formula. I am also interested in further exploration and testimony on S.220; because I agree and fully understand that we need to take immediate action to stabilize the education fund while school transformation efforts take hold.

We need to ensure that our school transformation efforts result in highly functioning Education Accountability System that includes benchmarks for increased academic growth year-over-year, per pupil spending oversight via the implementation of requiring school districts to comply with an excess cost spending threshold (if the foundation formula isn't implemented) or parameters provided via S.220, and continued implementation of minimum class sizes as guidelines for staffing. Failure to meet annual accountability measures should result in technical assistance from the Agency of Education that includes School Boards providing annual progress monitoring benchmarks that indicate transparency, strategic planning, and SU/SD leadership accountability standards that are aligned to Superintendent annual evaluation processes. It is critical that we are clear with our communities on the state of our schools and make certain that continuous improvement is a transparent system with the ultimate goal of implementing high-quality school improvement.

I want to conclude by indicating that I'm in agreement that something needs to occur in order to alleviate property tax pressures, increase student achievement and social emotional growth, as well as increase accountability and efficiency across Vermont's educational system. I don't believe time spent on mapping is going to get you to a place that will actually address those aforementioned concerns that need immediate attention. I think you need to analyze the parts of Act 73 that provide a road map to reaching the intent of the legislation, and adjust the parts of the legislation that are creating barriers to reaching the intent. **I don't believe moving forward with the drawing of Maps is going to result in the intent and desired outcomes of Act 73.**

I also call on all to stop any debate regarding Supervisory Unions vs. Supervisory Districts and reaffirm your commitment to local democracy, efficiency, accountability, and be clear that any/all school transformation will include both SUs and SDs. The debate around these governance structures is distracting from the real work that needs to be done to create better outcomes for our students.

I believe Vermonters understand common sense solutions, the power of local democracy to solve difficult situations, and have asked for and need a more transparent educational funding system, not a top-down mandate.

The good news is that there is still time to implement changes to Act 73 that will increase fiscal responsibility, preserve local democracy, increase school accountability, and result in increased student achievement and social/emotional growth.

Our students' futures and our state's viability moving forward are counting on it; and I am confident that your committee is going to be able to deliver something that meets those goals.

Respectfully submitted,

Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, WRVSU

