

**Vermont Senate
Senate Education Committee
2/25/26**

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 (WRVSU). 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.

I want to thank the Senate Education Committee for allowing me the opportunity to testify today on the maps currently being discussed in both the House and Senate Education Committees. Along with the policy proposals provided by Chair Bongartz in relation to the map that was introduced last week.

I want to once again reiterate that I agree and support the intent of Act 73 which states, *“To ensure each student is provided substantially equal educational opportunities that will prepare them to thrive in a 21st-century world, it is the intent of the General Assembly to work strategically, intentionally, and thoughtfully to ensure that each incremental change made to Vermont’s public education system provides strength and support to its only constitutionally required governmental service.”*

I also want to thank your Committee for the time and effort you have put in throughout the fall and early winter prior to the current legislative session to visit schools, supervisory unions, school districts, and to hear from concerned constituents across the state. It is clear, based upon the maps and corresponding policy that were introduced to your committee last week by Chair Bongartz, that you’ve taken the feedback provided seriously and have tried to incorporate it into your proposal. **I want to specifically call to your attention that you are considering a hybrid approach to mapping that provides for both Supervisory Unions and Supervisory Districts in the future state. I find that to be commendable and want to share my gratitude for that approach.**

It has and continues to be my desire to approach any/all mergers voluntarily, including mergers of districts that constitute larger Supervisory Unions; and therefore, want to be clear that I would prefer that any/all discussions related to maps align with the policy proposal provided by the Redistricting Task Force.

I also want to be abundantly clear that I much prefer your approach to mapping as compared to the only map produced in the House Education Committee thus far. That map eliminates the Supervisory Union governance structures altogether and results in forced consolidated Supervisory School Districts. I want to be clear that this type of approach is a non-starter for White River Valley Supervisory Union and the ten communities that I serve in my role as Superintendent of Schools for WRVSU. In addition, it fails to recognize the previous testimony and abundance of public comment that have come from Rural Communities across our state since H.454 was initially introduced.

I come to you today to continue to advocate that we ensure that the next steps we take are **strategic, intentional, thoughtful, and measured**; in order to make certain that unintended consequences do not result in a detriment to our students, or the future of our rural towns throughout the state. **To this end, I support many of the steps outlined in the Redistricting Task Force Report and the corresponding policy provided in Senator Bongartz's proposal.**

I want to emphasize, though, that any/all changes to Governance Structures, including to Supervisory Union Boundaries through the drawing of maps, must not be implemented until July 1, 2027. This provides for the time needed in order to allow for strategic planning to occur, in order to have a Roadmap for Success established prior to becoming fully operational.

There is strong evidence that voluntary approaches to creating collaborative systems, and even voluntary mergers, can create cost savings and improve educational outcomes in some situations. Cooperative alliances that facilitate cost-savings and improve systems while still retaining deep local roots make sense. This position statement supports a voluntary process by which collaborative efforts can achieve the outcomes of improved education for students at reasonable costs.

Therefore, I recommend that you then provide for two years of voluntary mergers to occur from July 1, 2027, through June 30, 2029, to allow for the voluntary mergers to occur as provided via Senator Bongartz's proposal. If mergers haven't occurred voluntarily by July 1, 2029, then the State Board of Education could utilize the authority provided to them by the changes proposed to consolidate into the desired number of school districts.

While making certain that we acknowledge in legislation that forced consolidation must be backed by clear and transparent researched data that supports greater efficiency, results in cost savings, and provides for better outcomes for our students. The notion that the act of simply consolidating is going to result in savings and better outcomes for our students isn't supported in research, and therefore, requires that clear criteria for any/all forced consolidation must be established and transparent prior to implementation by the State Board of Education.

I understand that Vermonters are looking for immediate action to address efficiency, rising costs, and property taxes. Therefore, I once again ask that any/all proposals that your committee considers also include the strongly researched policies previously provided to you via the use of the **Cooperative Educational Service Areas**, and by requesting all SUs and SDs work cooperatively and collaboratively to partner in these service areas **by no later than July 1, 2027**. This could allow for them to be operational in the immediate future and begin addressing the efficiencies articulated in the Redistricting Task Force Report. I don't see this as another added level of bureaucracy and find them incredibly important in addressing the areas of needed improvement highlighted within the recently released Special Education report provided by the Agency of Education.

I also want to be clear 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 in order to provide predictable tax rates year-to-year due to the complexity and significant number of elements that play a role in the finalized residential tax rate. As an example, I currently have a unified school district in the WRVSU that is requesting \$43,112 less from the Education Fund in FY27 vs. FY26, but their projected residential tax rates in FY27 are increasing by more than 14.5%. That doesn't align with the values of Vermonters who seek to find common-sense solutions to complex problems.

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 to the foundation formula. This shouldn't be implemented until fiscal year FY30, when the newly formed mergers have taken effect.

Therefore, I recommend that you utilize provisions as provided via S.220 to provide for an immediate tool to address Vermonters' concerns during Fiscal Years 28 and 29 until the revised funding formula is implemented in FY30.

I want to be clear that I see a spending cap as only a tool that should be used on a transitional basis, and needs to assure school districts that it provides for safeguards in order to address things like decreased weights, percentage drop in LTWADM, impacts

on per pupil spending on things that are out of a district's control like health insurance premiums (that are bargained state-wide).

I would also ask that your committee look to examine whether it makes the most sense to cap per pupil spending, or if Act 68 spending makes more sense, based on taking out some of the unpredictable variables that come into play regarding student weights. As has been previously stated by members of the educational field, data integrity has and continues to be a major concern. Hence, why the approach to looking at Act 68 spending may make more sense (Education Spending - Local Revenue).

I would additionally ask that any cap on spending also be aligned directly with announced elementary and secondary tuitions for all public and private schools. We can't place a cap on spending per pupil for a district that is non-operating or has non-operating grades, and allow for districts to increase their announced tuition beyond that % of the spending cap.

Relatedly, I want to urge your committee to make certain that we have some type of transitional method in place to deal with a district that loses pupils in the event that a per pupil spending cap is put into place via S.220. I currently have one of my districts that has a Board-approved budget of an increase of only 0.80% (\$73,159) in increased expenditures for FY27, but their per pupil spending is up 9.28%. Meaning they would need to significantly cut programming for students in order to comply with a per pupil spending cap, due primarily to a decrease in ADM at the PreK level, and a drop in weights due to a decrease in Free and Reduced lunch rate % given changes to direct certification via medicaid qualification.

Hence, I'm open-minded and supportive of a transitional tool like S.220, but caution that we need to take all of the aforementioned factors into account prior to passing final legislation.

I want to conclude by indicating that I am 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 believe that we could accomplish all of this without the need to actually draw lines on a map, but I also want to commend your committee for considering a map that provides for Supervisory Unions.

I believe the timeline and actionable steps needed in legislation that provides for Educational Transformation should be:

***CESAs for all SUs and SDs assigned by July 1, 2026**

***Newly formed SUs become operational on July 1, 2027**

***Voluntary mergers of School Districts within newly formed Supervisory Unions and Supervisory Districts by June 30, 2029, or utilize the authority of the State Board to require consolidation as provided via Chair Bongartz's proposal. With an important reminder that this must be aligned to researched criteria that provide for efficiency and better outcomes for students.**

***Use of temporary spending caps in FY28 and 29 as provided via S.220, with aforementioned concerns addressed.**

***Implementation of a revised funding formula that takes effect on July 1, 2029, for FY30 once voluntary mergers have taken place to reach desired numbers of SUs/SDs.**

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. I ask that you consider approaching this work without the need to draw lines on a map, but also want to once again share my sincere appreciation for your approach to mapping thus far. I believe that incorporating SUs within your maps integrates the feedback you've received from concerned Vermonters and works to provide protections for Rural Communities across our state.

The good news is that I believe you are all committed in this committee, to increasing fiscal responsibility, preserving local democracy, and raising school accountability. While also having a strategic plan that results in increased student achievement and social/emotional growth.

Therefore, I want you all to know that I'm more than willing to partner with you as an educational leader to make certain you have policy and legislation that meets those commendable and incredibly important goals for our students, our communities, and for all Vermonters.

Respectfully submitted,

Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, WRVSU