

To: Senate Education Committee
Date: January 20, 2026
Subject: Redistricting Maps/Act 73
From: Jay Nichols, Senior Executive Director Vermont Principals' Association

Good afternoon. My testimony today is two-fold. First to point out a few considerations related to testimony shared by the Agency of Education and secondly to share a concept memo that the VPA believes is a better path forward to ultimate educational transformation in the state of Vermont.

VSBA Regions Map:

- This is a loose configuration that the Vermont School Board's Association utilizes for their regional meetings. It has no connection to school governance that would benefit mapping of new governmental entities.
- Some of the new districts would still be bigger than 8000. Although we think the 4000-8000 student enrollment has no real basis in research, we do agree that once you get past 8000 students you often find declining efficiencies and performance. We can provide you with research on this if you like but we believe the Vermont Superintendent's Association already provided you with this research last year.
- Some of these districts as drawn up would not have a high school while others would have many high schools.

Regional High School Districts

- While marginally better than the VSBA Regions Map would break up some Supervisory Unions and Supervisory Districts that have worked together for a period of time and may already have some built in efficiencies that we could lose.
- Still too focused on the artificial number of 4000 (we understand the attempt at reaching necessary scale to "make the math work" but don't think governance should be an afterthought in service of a desired financial end.)

Hybrid

- Some of the same issues but at first review appears to be the better of the three options although we have many of the same concerns with this option.

All of the organizations that represent the folks in schools doing the work point to the cost drivers in education that they have little or no control over. Unfunded and funded

mandates, out of control health care costs, obligations once in the general fund being moved to the education fund. We think any long term solutions have to address these cost pressures. We are in meetings with other Associations of the "V's" to see where we can find common agreement and make common recommendations to the General Assembly related to Act 73. In the meantime, the VPA has shared the concepts below with many of our educational partners and hope our associations will be collectively engaged with you on these issues.

If the General Assembly is convinced that forced mergers, a foundation formula and governance structures must be part of any solution – the VPA offers the following concepts for your consideration.

Act 173 Alternative Approach

Header: Main Points and Quick Rationale

1. All Supervisory Union's merge into School Districts

- a. Easier transition to merge operations and structures
- b. Similar or same policies and contracts in many cases
- c. Working with people you already are supposed to be working with to find efficiencies and effectiveness
- d. Less likely to completely upend the entire educational delivery system – allows for some level of system stability to the disruption that huge changes in the system have on students, staff, and communities
- e. 119 districts move to 51
- f. Combine under 1000 where practicable
 - i. E.g. AD. Northwest; Essex North; Bennington Rutland, Grand Isle; Lincoln; Mill River; Orange Southwest; St. J; Two Rivers; Windham Central; Windham Northeast; Windham Southwest; Winooski;
- g. Local representation for each town on the new school boards

2. Encouraging voluntary mergers of new/larger SD's

- a. Grants and incentives to help with this work for systems who want to do it – using Education Opportunity Payment as potential "carrot" lever
- b. Class sizes, the 1000-4000 overall district number, etc. as potential "stick" lever.

3. Foundation Formula (Education Opportunity Payments)

- a. Goes into effect after merger concept – one year "lag"
- b. Education Spending above state payment subject to vote by citizens of new district

- c. Goal to reduce growth of education spending overtime AND to slowly close disparities in equalized per pupil spending
- d. Accurate modeling will need to be in place for all current and created school districts
- e. Allowance for moving downward in education spending over a set period of time via a transition method set by the state as necessary
 - i. We do not want to make large impactful cuts to systems that are already largely at scale simply because they pay their personnel well
- f. Protection for local taxpayers in lower spending districts to make sure that any corresponding required increased educational spending doesn't adversely impact Vermonters in lower spending communities
- g. The VPA remains skeptical about a Foundation Formula and we worry that SU's and SD's will be put together in a manner that makes the math work but does nothing to better serve children

4. School Closures

- a. Local School Districts make these decisions
- b. All voters in the District vote
- c. Follow process set in the Commission on the Future of Public Education Report
 - i. This is a thoughtful and deliberate process that allows for a local town(s) to have legitimate voice in the closing or significant repurposing of their school but not veto power over the district at large which would make the final decision subject to appeal at the State Board level

5. Choice

- a. District School Boards decide if they are going to have choice or not
- b. Boards who do have choice may delegate the schools they will allow their pupils to attend
- c. Any children already in a school would be allowed to continue their educational career at that school

6. School Infrastructure

- a. Develop and fund school construction program
- b. Finance program at state level with a set amount each year. Increase the amount when/if finances are available
 - i. Consider concepts used in Rhode Island and Massachusetts to fund school construction program
- c. School Districts are provided resources on a most needed basis with encouragement for combining student populations into new and or updated and modernized facilities
- d. Major focus on scaled, modern, high quality regional high schools with new construction or rebuilds to existing structures that could serve this function

7. Cooperative Education Service Areas,

- a. Lean into the concept of the Vermont Regional Education Partnership Model as envisioned by the School District Redistricting Task Force
- b. Provide state level support for systems to implement partnerships within the regions
 - i. E.g.
 - 1. shared alternative educational programs with certain specific needs that can't be served well in the traditional school setting
 - 2. Shared payroll and other H.R. functions

Note: The purpose here is to get at real reform without completely disrupting the educational delivery system. This would move the state in a direction that gets to better scale and would make it easier to further combine districts if the General Assembly decides to do that in the future. I believe it would be a lot more tolerable for Vermonters and would allow neighbors to work with neighbors that they already have relationships with.

Respectfully submitted,

Jay Nichols