

TO: Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director

DATE: February 12, 2026

RE: Testimony responding to Chair Conlon's "conversation starter" maps and accompanying proposed legislative language

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Thank you for inviting us to offer some preliminary thoughts about the proposal that was recently released by the chair of the House Education Committee. We are still learning about the proposal and, as we know, the details do matter.

We appreciate that the proposal offers a map that is much more in line with Vermont's community scale and connectivity, and that, alone, may be the right approach. In Vermont's most recent three town elections concerning the closing of a community school (Danville, Calais, and Worcester), Vermonters overwhelmingly voted to keep their local community schools open. Local schools are a treasured part of the fabric of our communities, and the proposed map does not create districts that are so large as to make Vermonters detached from the schools. Likewise, local control is a hallmark of good governance and the proposal, including the map, appears to maintain the nexus between a community's school and the citizens of that community.

We remain supportive of the approach proposed by the Act 73 School District Redistricting Task Force that called for strategic voluntary mergers, building out regional comprehensive high schools, CESA/BOCES, and utilizing school construction incentives. With the second oldest school facilities stock in the country, merging districts necessarily must include aid for new or remodeled facilities. If there is no state aid, as there was before 2008, new school governance structures will be faced with an immediate crisis that will undermine their success, if not doom the new governance model to complete failure. We support a statewide school construction plan to fund and advise school communities as they navigate any transformation process. Lastly, and part and parcel to any school construction program, is the need for a reasonable timeline for merging school districts to address complex issues while working to develop genuine community buy-in for the new school system.

In reviewing the proposed "conversation starter" from Chair Conlon, there are several points deserving comment.

The contracting provision makes a lot of sense. It seems to present a logical way to ensure there is a comprehensive written document encapsulating the relationship between taxpayer dollars and the schools that educate Vermont's students. We support this provision. As to designation, we understand the need for and the value of the four historic academies, and as such, we think it

correct to leave to the locally elected school board to make the designation decision based on state guidance.

As for the contractual requirements found at section 2(b)(1) spelling out what any public school board must have in any contract with an approved independent school, it seems as if more testimony is needed. We have heard of issues surrounding students who arrive at a public school with little to no notice and without records from their previous school, which causes academic concerns. Those sections should be fully examined to determine the scope of the issues the subsection is attempting to address, but at a minimum, publicly funded students must be enrolled so they can receive the education they deserve and are Constitutionally entitled to receive.

Thank you for giving me some time today, and I am happy to answer any questions.