

Senate Education Committee
Testimony February, 13, 2026

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Lisa McCarthy
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Good afternoon and thank you for having me here today. My name is Lisa McCarthy and I am the principal of Craftsbury Schools. Ada Allen, a 10th grade student from Craftsbury Academy is also here to testify today about the student experience. Craftsbury is a preK-12 public school district located in Orleans county. We have two campuses with our elementary schools, preK-2, being located in the village and the Academy campus, grades 3-12, located on Craftsbury Common. We are a member of the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union which encompasses the towns of Craftsbury, Wolcott, Hardwick, Greensboro, Stannard and Woodbury.

Before I speak in regards to the newly created maps that were introduced by House Education Chair Conlon last week, I want to set the stage and provide understanding and context to the experience that a student in a rural, community school has in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont.

Craftsbury is a town and community that deeply values education and the importance of local democracy and local decision-making. There has been tremendous support for our preK-12 school system historically and this remains true today. We currently stand out in our region as a school that has a stable school population. We are not declining in enrollment like many other schools in Vermont.

We are a school with a community school mindset. We have over 25 active community partners, not including family volunteers, who we engage with on a daily basis. These are relationships that have been formed and cultivated over time and are an integral part not just of our school, but also the community of Craftsbury as a whole. School and community are intertwined. This current week alone we are engaging with six community partners in various ways to enrich the educational experience of our students. On Monday and Tuesday the Northern Counties Dental Hub was at our school treating students who would not normally have reliable access to dental care. This morning members of the Freedom and Unity Town Committee met with our students in grades 3, 4 and 5 to plan for our mock town meeting day experience, which is an annual experiential learning opportunity and part of our approach to civics education. This week our middle school students, as part of the WithOut Walls Wednesday program, attended a VT Opera performance at the Highland Center for the Arts and they are at this moment in time busy reading at the Craftsbury Public Library for DIRT. DIRT, daily independent reading time, is part of our approach to middle school literacy instruction and each Friday we walk across the common to the public library for this experience. In addition to accessing the collection at the library, all students now have a public library membership and a relationship with the town librarians. Many students now utilize the public library who had previously never stepped foot in the doors prior to this experience.

Additionally, we have a robust winter wellness program that is not only a component of our approach to physical education in Craftsbury, but also serves students grades K-12. This week students in grades 4 and 5 were nordic skiing at the Craftsbury Outdoor Center and our

high school students traveled to Jay Peak for Ski and Ride through the Foundations program. At the high school level students have a flexible pathway to obtain PE credit through our CAPE program, which provides opportunities throughout the year in lifelong outdoor education experiences. The opportunities I just shared with you are an example of an average week in Craftsbury and this is all possible due to our strong relationships with community partners in the town and immediate geographic region in which our school is located. Not only do these opportunities round out a high quality academic experience, but with the exception of our Jay Peak programming, all are free of cost to our school and students due to the strong community relationships we have fostered.

In Craftsbury, we are proud of the rigorous and relevant high school experience that we provide. We offer diverse and high quality instructional programming so that our small school can provide students with big opportunities. We currently have 9 AP course options at the high school level and students engaging in flexible pathways through dual enrollment, early college, work-based learning, attending the tech center, virtual learning and other creative learning opportunities. We additionally have a wide-range of student clubs and athletic teams which at times overlap with students from Lake Region and Hazen, providing increased opportunities and social experiences. This year alone, we added various clubs, including our animal husbandry club and rocketry club, that were created based on student interest. Our rocketry club members are busy preparing for a state-wide competition this spring.

In Craftsbury, our school board, administration and community members are not afraid to engage in the hard, and sometimes gritty work, of local democracy to have the tough conversations needed in regards to balancing educational priorities and fiscal responsibility. This current budget season, our original draft budget had a projected 12% total increase. In January, the Secretary, Zoie Saunders, called on school boards to engage in the tough work of maintaining fiscal responsibility and the Craftsbury board and community rose to this call. There was input, there were many conversations, there were school board meetings, and ultimately, the budget that was approved by the board reflected a 6% increase which is below, or in line, with many towns in the state of Vermont this year. Local democracy is not always efficient. It takes time and it takes dedicated elected officials who care. It takes time to listen, it honors input and feedback, and it welcomes creative problem solving. Local decision-making is not always efficient, but it is a central component of a thriving democratic society and it's something we do well in Vermont.

I want to be clear that I am not opposed to change at the state level in regards to education. I think change needs to happen. However, I believe that ACT 73, as it was originally presented in the last legislative session, has impacts that disproportionately impact rural schools and communities. At the end of last week, legislation was introduced that includes maps that delineate 27 school districts. I was dismayed to see a return to maps and especially maps that included only school districts and did not incorporate supervisory unions. I have significant concerns that a school district governance structure would not only significantly impact our school in Craftsbury, but would have far reaching impacts on our ability to maintain viable rural towns across the state of Vermont.

Currently, it appears that at the state-level there is an ideological debate being played out through education that is pitting a “bigger is better mentality” against our long-seeded history in Vermont that values the importance of local democracy and community. Rural schools are not the enemy and quite honestly, are not the cost driver in the complex state-wide education funding system. The current map presented last week which outlines 27 school districts, strips our rural communities of decision-making around their schools. It creates a governance structure that de-personalizes decision-making and leads to a top down approach. There is no evidence that this type of structure has any cost savings and I do believe that this type of structure will inevitably lead to the closure of schools in rural towns, which could in all probability lead to a change in our grade level configurations in Craftsbury.

It is important to know that Craftsbury Academy doesn't only serve the students of Craftsbury but attracts students from our neighboring towns of Wolcott and Stannard. Chair Conlon was clear during discussions last week when the maps were introduced that these larger **School District Boards would more than likely need to close smaller schools if any savings were to be recognized.** Therefore, our school is threatened if these maps are carried out as Supervisory District Maps, and in all probability they could lead to a change in the **197 year old institution of Craftsbury Academy.** That is likely to occur due to the fact that we would be discussing a new school board, elected via voting wards, in a new school district that likely has no representation from the town where the school has stood for 197 years.

This approach would not be the Vermont I know.

While I am here today speaking about education, I have grave concerns about how the push to consolidate governance structures and community schools will impact the future viability of towns in rural Vermont. I believe that large, regional districts, with elected boards that do not have strong representation from all towns will over time close schools in rural communities. As a native Vermonter, and somebody who moved back from out-of-state to start a family, I can attest that in choosing a town where I would raise my children, the school and the ability to be involved in a small, local, public school was a priority for me. I would not have bought a house in a town where I would then have to put my 5 year old child on a long bus ride. As is the case in Roxbury, I believe that property values will be impacted and families will congregate in closer physical proximity to the larger regional schools leaving rural Vermont communities further burdened and with further declining town populations. I do not see this as a plan with the core values of Vermont being represented.

I want to close today by circling back to the information I shared about the Craftsbury budget previously. While I did initially share this to demonstrate the power of local democracy. What I didn't share is that I believe we can all do better than a 6% increase in the future. This is where we need your help. This budget the board approved had a reduction in 1.5 FTE staff members, but still rose 6% due to increases largely outside our control. Health insurance, transportation, and special education costs continue to rise and impact our ability to be able to maintain a lower percentage increase. I strongly feel that the change we need is to commit to further exploring

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the Redistricting Task Force's recommendations to pursue a Centralized Educational Service Areas model to consolidate and control these cost drivers.

I thank you for your time today and would like to welcome Ada Allen forward to share the Craftsbury student experience.