

February 25, 2026

Hello, my name is Matt Foster, and I am the Superintendent of Caledonia Central Supervisory Union. I want to thank you all for the opportunity to speak with you about the proposed Senate Map and potential changes to Vermont's public education system.

CCSU comprises the towns of Cabot, Danville, Marshfield, Plainfield, Peacham, Walden, Waterford, and Barnet. We are 5 districts, and 7 schools, and all of our schools are very rural. Our SU touches the central part of the state to the south, we touch New Hampshire to the east, and make up a good portion of the NEK. Three of our districts are grades PreK-12. Two of our districts, Peacham (PreK-6) and Caledonia Cooperative District (CalCoop) (PreK-8), do not have a high school and use choice for their students.

Our SU was put together as a result of ACT 46. The Cal Coop District was created with Walden, Waterford, and Barnet and was placed in CCSU. Cabot and Twinfield had their SU merged with CCSU. This merger resulted in several teacher and support staff contracts being utilized by the various districts in our SU. I bring this up as a point of consideration as the legislature continues to work on how to bring districts together or to rearrange our state's School Districts and SUs for the purpose of improved efficiency, money saving, and ultimately, we hope, improved educational outcomes for our students.

Looking at the current Senate-proposed map, I believe all of my districts are more hopeful than under the House-proposed map. Our Peacham and CalCoop districts are thankful for the Senate's consideration of school choice for their secondary students. I think that all of our districts are appreciative of not being forced into mergers, and requiring mergers if the state's goals have not been met seems a reasonable compromise. Reducing the SUs and Districts by at least 50% sounds wonderful- if the mergers can be completed in a thoughtful manner that results in efficiency, money savings, and increased student achievement, instead of time spent on navigating the intricacies of merging communities and contracts, which creates community strife, turmoil, and a focus on many things not student-related.

However, I want the Senate and the House to remember how challenging and time-consuming it was to navigate and complete the mergers under ACT 46. Despite that effort, the state has not yet completed a formal study to measure ACT 46's success. One may consider the current state of Vermont's public education system the result of Act 46, or at least in part, but this was the state's last attempt at consolidation. Either way, I do think it is important to consider ACT 46's history as we try to improve current legislation to support public education.

Last year, CCSU finally achieved 1 contract for support staff and 1 contract for certified staff. This process took over 7 years to complete. I can say that, just as there have been unanticipated challenges in negotiating a statewide contract to reduce health insurance costs, there have been many unanticipated challenges in reaching an agreement on these CCSU contracts.

As the state considers consolidation and mergers, please note that the CCSU legacy contracts with the highest compensation did carry over to the newly ratified contracts. We did not save money on salaries as a result of ACT 46. There were other positive outcomes, but salary cost reduction was not one of them. Salaries and compensation make up around 80% of school budgets- we are a people organization, just as you are, so I am sure this makes sense. So, ultimately, school consolidation improved the efficiency of increasing salaries for our staff. I believe our staff is worth the increases, but taxpayers are responsible for paying the salaries that resulted from ACT 46. I have heard that reducing the number of schools is the ultimate money saver that will result from ACT 73- that makes sense, but we saw the recent vote results for closing two elementary schools fail. If the state wants to close schools, the process for doing so must be meticulously laid out, and a time frame longer than what is being proposed must be provided to our communities and taxpayers.

I think it is important not only to create a map to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance student achievement, but also to put in place a more thoroughly conceived process to execute the plan and achieve those goals. Act 46 taught me that competing contracts, community resistance to school closures, salary variability, multiple lengths of the workday, and various ancillary insurance benefits provided by different districts will take longer than 2 years to complete contract negotiations, whether forced or voluntary.

I applaud a simpler funding method for our communities and schools, but changing the method and implementing the new formula while new contracts are still being negotiated will exacerbate an already challenging situation and negatively affect staff, in turn affecting our students' ability to learn. Please reconsider the implementation timeline or consider a hold-harmless provision for a longer transition to make the switch to the new school finance method smoother.

When I worked in Illinois, I had the opportunity to work in school districts with enrollments ranging from 12,000 to 21,000 students. In the larger suburban school district, we were large enough to run our own specialized instruction programs for students with needs that occur with less frequency. This same district, with 21,000 students, was also a member of a special education BOCES- this was a benefit to us. I think that BOCES can be part of the solution to improving education for our students in general, and particularly for students with special education needs. The current upheaval in Vermont public education is holding back the development of additional BOCES.

The AOE's recent report on the state of special education in Vermont outlined how our schools do a great job of providing inclusive education for many students with special education needs, but struggle with more specialized or intensive supports. I do think that, in general, smaller school districts struggle to provide more intensive support for many students with special education needs. As a result, many districts end up sending students to programs outside their own districts, which is costly. As more BOCES are developed, we can provide needed specialized support regionally- a model that is educationally sound and fiscally responsible. These larger districts that I worked for in Illinois were large and expensive. The costs per student were higher in the suburbs than in rural areas- larger size does not mean less

expensive. Much of the financial inequality in Illinois stems from reliance on local property taxes, which creates economic disparity and educational inequality. As complicated as our school funding method is, we are fortunate in Vermont that we structure our funding system to fight those financial inequalities.

Not only were the large districts expensive per student, but the community members were also less engaged. We are fortunate that in Vermont, you can still visit the transfer station to learn everything you want about local government issues. One loses that connection with larger organizations. SUs allow for economies of scale in administrative overhead and maintain more opportunities for local involvement in school boards, which will be reduced as districts get larger.

In closing:

- The proposed Senate map has many positives.
- BOCES can alleviate many current challenges by increasing districts' capacity to serve students and sharing costs, but they cannot be easily established in the current climate of public education uncertainty.
- Bigger does not mean cheaper.
- Act 46 had a large impact on Vermont Public Education, and I learned that one should:
 - Lengthen timelines to allow for mergers and consolidation
 - Expect unanticipated variables to delay progress and increase costs
 - Expect salaries and benefits to go up, not down
- SUs provide an efficient and economical way to organize central office leadership and maintain community involvement through smaller districts.

Thank you,
Matt Foster
Superintendent
Caledonia Central Supervisory Union