

Senate Education Committee - 2.25.26

Michael Livingston, Vice-Chair, Sharon School District Board

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with all of you. Please know, I don't take this opportunity for granted. I want to thank you all for your extensive work regarding education transformation. In particular, I want to appreciate you for your commitment to recognizing the importance of supervisory unions. Your work on behalf of SU's is of paramount importance as I hope to detail in my testimony.

Personal Information

My name is Michael Livingston and I worked as an educator, primarily in the Upper Valley of Vermont, for over 40 years. Slightly more than half of that time was spent as an elementary school teacher and administrator in our public school system. I also have 20 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in an independent school. I have been incredibly fortunate to teach grades K - 12 in a variety of school settings.

I retired four years ago after serving as the principal at the Tunbridge Central School where I helped reimagine programming for the First Branch School District, shifting grades K - 4 to the Tunbridge Central school and moving all 5 - 8 graders to the Chelsea school. I'm currently a member of the Sharon Elementary School board as well as a member of the White River Valley Supervisory Union board where I perform a number of responsibilities.

Context

Our schools are essential to our communities just as our communities are essential for our schools. A recent brainstorm with our vibrant and active Sharon Elementary School PTO generated a list of over 30 activities and events held over the last year alone at our school that bind our school and community, helping create lasting, meaningful connections - connections that are palpable the moment you walk in the school building. Those connections are not an accident, they are the result of strong leadership, leadership built around trust and respect that is honestly communicated to students by the entire faculty and staff, all day, every day.

It's a belief system grounded in a sense of belonging that permeates the school from the pre-K program all the way to the superintendent. That success is wedded to an unwavering sense of trust.

That trust binds us, indeed connects us, and given the extreme, and growing, needs of our families in rural Vermont, preserving trust has become the central role of our small rural schools. Trust is the essential ingredient for connection. And it turns out that connection matters. A lot. It isn't the number of afterschool clubs or sports being offered by schools that matter. It's being seen and spoken to and held and challenged, every day, by multiple school personnel. That's the recipe for success and it doesn't happen in mega-schools accessible only after hours-long bus rides. It happens at your town school where you are respected, trusted, known, believed in, challenged, and held accountable. Where you are truly seen.

What I'm describing to you is a highly successful system, one that's driven by strong, passionate leadership. **I believe our examination of educational reform needs to focus on school leadership.** The question we need to be asking is, what are we doing to cultivate strong leaders? I have witnessed the absolute transformation of our supervisory union in the last six years. Please understand, it's not perfect. But I don't know a system of any kind or at any scale that is. What makes our SU so remarkable to me is the ability of leadership to communicate a vision so clearly, to get so many to eagerly join in, to watch the momentum it creates across all facets of the school from the custodial staff and food service personnel to bus drivers, para professionals, teaching staff and parent volunteers. Let me elaborate.

A Case for Supervisory Unions

Our supervisory union office provides outstanding support, while operating at a cost below the state average and improving student outcomes year over year. Our SU operates like a mini BOCES or CESA. An effective superintendent, empowered by engaged boards, can create a distributed leadership team aligned to goals and mission, while serving students in districts of varying sizes. Let me highlight the work of some of our key members of that team.

Our **Chief Academic Officer** has overseen the push to coordinate literacy instruction throughout our SU. Professional development on the science of reading is being offered to all teachers pre-K through two and we're using either Heggerty or Foundations, research-based foundational approaches to early literacy, across all of those grades. We are also coordinating the EL language arts program in grades three through eight throughout our entire SU.

The Bridges math program (with its fabulous number corner) is being used by all pre-K through five teachers and Connected Math is the program for 6 - 8 graders. All of the SU curriculum is guided by our **Portrait of a Learner**, a framework generated two years ago by a committee of parents, students, board members, paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators. In my 40+ years in education, it's among the documents I've been most proud to help develop. Please, find a moment today to take a close look at it. It is a template for success. It recognizes our need to consider the multiplicity of needs presented by our students and our families. It provides multiple pathways to success. And it honors the enormous diversity of learners that we encounter every day.

Our **Portrait of a Learner** is posted in every classroom in the SU, not as lip service to administration but rather as a beacon, reminding us of the six pillars of success we all agreed on:

- 1. Effective communication and collaboration**
- 2. Academic proficiency**
- 3. Creativity and curiosity**
- 4. Flexible thinking**
- 5. Resiliency and wellbeing, and**
- 6. Personal and community responsibility.**

In the last two weeks alone I have seen three examples of our profile in action. Our fifth graders wrote short pieces about why they love their school and their town to read to elders in our community who gather once a month for lunch. Each grade takes one of those luncheons to serve their elders lunch, eat with them and then clear the tables. It is beyond heartwarming. Last week I listened to the fourth graders share their reports on famous people from around the world they chose to research and write about. Each presentation included a portrait they had created in art class.

The fourth graders were mentored by the sixth graders who are themselves preparing for a capstone project, a multi-media presentation on a topic of their own choosing. All of those activities engaged each of the six pillars.

Our SU coordinates **food service** and I've seen a huge improvement in the quality of what's being offered to our children. **Transportation** is now no longer the province of each individual school. There is no question that shared contracting reduces our transportation costs.

We share the expertise of a **Special Education Director** who currently oversees and coordinates services SU-wide. This year WRVSVU created the **Waterman Campus Program** where 15 struggling students in grades 5-10 attend school in the basement of the SU office building in an effort to find their footing and eventually successfully return to their home schools. The program has been a huge success by every measure. Students are happy and engaged. Attendance is at 90% for students who were chronically truant. For these vulnerable, high-needs students, the other option was to attend an alternative program, outside our district, where we would have no oversight of their progress. Those programs cost taxpayers \$100K. Our program's cost per student, by comparison, is \$23K. This program should be a model for all of our SU's and SD's.

Our **Technology Director** is helping coordinate all of our various databases under one umbrella program, Alma. Staff have been trained to reliably use our databases which allows for our school data teams to more accurately assess the needs of our students. Data is now much more readily accessible to our faculty, staff and parents. As a result of these efforts attendance is up and major misbehaviors are down.

Our **Business Manager** is an absolute godsend to our school district, providing a level of expertise and accessibility we could otherwise not have imagined (or afforded, for that matter).

Anyone who suggests or even implies that supervisory unions are incapable of coordinating curriculum, instruction, and professional development, and ultimately positive opportunities for our students is wrong. I can literally show you. In fact, many of you saw it for yourselves just a few months ago when your committee visited our high school campus in South Royalton.

But ultimately, this isn't about the fact that SU's are capable of replicating what some say is only possible in an SD. **The extraordinary difference between these two governance models is that SU's preserve local voice.** As a local school board member I am, literally, held accountable by my neighbors and friends in town. I have to be able to communicate what we're doing and why we're doing it.

The connection between local schools and their school boards is an integral part of the bedrock foundation of our democracy. Any thought that we would be taking steps to dismantle that relationship is irresponsible. There's no need to do so.

No one currently operating a supervisory union wishes to impose our model on everyone else. Why then, are those utilizing a supervisory district model so eager to impose their structure on others? It's not just unnecessary, it's counterproductive.

It is my hope that the legislature would consider five actionable steps. The first four revolve around identifying the real cost drivers in education.

1. Healthcare
2. Special education
3. Student mental health needs, and
4. Transportation

The 5th would be to examine the educational landscape in Vermont, identify exemplary programs and showcase them as a model for change and success. That expertise and capacity exists within our state. Where you find outstanding schools you'll find outstanding leadership.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the tremendous effort your committee has made in the field collecting relevant data and your efforts taking extensive feedback in committee hearings. Thank you for giving this incredibly important conversation the justice it deserves. I believe schools can, and will, collaborate and negotiate voluntary consolidation. I don't believe we need maps, we need effective leadership. If we do embrace maps it is my sincere hope they include SU's. They offer the benefit of scale and the value of finding creative, pragmatic solutions to problems specific to their communities, while preserving local democracy.