

To: Senate Education Committee

From: Robert Carpenter, Chair and Marlon Verasamy Vice-Chair, Essex Westford School District Board

Subject: Testimony Regarding Proposed School Consolidation Maps and the Future of CESA Models

Chair Bongartz and Members of the Committee,

While redrawing maps may seem like a solution, without a clear and sustainable funding formula, consolidation alone will not “transform Vermont education.”

As you all know, EWSD and CVSD, are the state’s two largest districts and have already undergone voluntary mergers. As an example, if we were to merge voluntarily, staffing costs would rise due to contract equalization, and neither district could close buildings to save money because there’s no space to relocate students.

Even building a new consolidated facility would strain finances, as construction costs would come directly from that year’s budget, forcing cuts to student services. This is a direct result of the current foundation formula.

There are many concerns in the current foundation formula; it decimates special education. Take my own district - the second largest in Vermont that serves some of the highest numbers of special needs learners. We will be underfunded by 6 million dollars for special education

Maintaining special ed would require **6 million** in cuts elsewhere. The catch is, if we don't fully fund that 6 million dollar gap, we would become ineligible for any Federal Funding, another **1.4 million dollars** of critically needed funding for vulnerable students, gone.

This crisis scenario will play out in every school district or newly created Supervisory Union in Vermont. This new funding system creates a competition between general education spending and special ed spending - making districts choose which students receive resources. This is just one example.

Regardless of the map, the current proposed foundation formula does not address special education, transportation costs, capital improvement of our aging buildings, or debt service. Districts will need to cover these on an annual basis, leading to massive cuts in the instructional abilities of schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the future of Vermont’s education governance. I stand before you today on behalf of the Essex Westford School District (EWSD) to offer a perspective rooted in a decade of successful, voluntary reform.

1. Recognize the Work Already Done

EWSD is a testament to the fact that consolidation can work when it is community-driven. Through Act 46, we merged multiple towns and governance structures into a single, cohesive district that serves nearly 4,000 students. We have already achieved the "right-sizing" that the legislature and governor are currently seeking. Much like our sister district, CVU, that **Senator Ram-Hinsdale** represents.

For Chittenden County, we find the map proposed by **Representative Conlon** to be a more grounded starting point, as it acknowledges the districts that have already met the state's scale requirements. In contrast, the current map proposed by **Senator Bongartz** is again deeply concerning for Chittenden County and the surrounding counties. Great care was put into listening to the concerns of Vermonters in crafting the proposed 11 Supervisory Districts. But as we've seen in this map, like the maps produced by Senator Beck and the Governor before, little to no care was put into the potential districts covering over 36,000 students, 40% of the public school students in the state. By grouping our high-performing, already-consolidated districts into a single "blob" for further forced mergers from 17 districts to 9. The map risks dismantling the very systems that are currently working for Vermont's students. Again, for the 3rd time, leaders in the state will work overtime to protect a portion of Vermont districts, while putting the burden again on districts and families of the Capitol Region and the Champlain Valley. This is intentional.

2. Advocacy for a Hybrid Approach

We urge this committee to explore a **hybrid version** of these two maps. A successful path forward must:

- **Acknowledge Current Scale:** Do not force further consolidation on districts that already meet the 2,000–4,000 student threshold.
- **Respect Identity:** Avoid creating "mega-districts" where local school boards become so removed from their communities that democratic oversight is lost.
- **Protect Representation:** Chittenden County represents a significant portion of Vermont's student population, approximately 1/4th; any map that lacks granular representation for our region is, by definition, incomplete.

3. Continuing the Work on CESAs

While the Secretary of Education has expressed concerns regarding **Cooperative Education Service Areas (CESAs)**, the EWSD Board strongly advocates for their continued exploration.

The Redistricting Task Force was right to point out that governance is only one half of the equation: service delivery is the other. **Forty other states** successfully utilize versions of CESAs (often called ESAs, BOCES or RESAs) to provide regionalized special education, transportation, and IT services. This model allows districts to maintain local governance while achieving the "economies of scale" the state desires. It is a proven model across the country

and offers a more surgical solution for student needs than the blunt instrument of forced boundary changes.

Conclusion

EWSD is not anti-reform. In fact, we are a product of it. We ask the Senate to reward the districts that have done the hard work of voluntary consolidation by protecting their structures, rather than forcing them back into a state of transition that distracts from our primary mission: educating and supporting students.

We look forward to working with you on a map that reflects the geographic and operational realities of the entire state.