



LAMOILLE SOUTH SUPERVISORY UNION

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Good afternoon, Senators,

For the record, my name is Ryan Heraty, and I am the Superintendent of Lamoille South, which includes the towns of Elmore, Morristown, and Stowe. Today, I am providing testimony on behalf of our two school districts to respectfully urge the Legislature to focus less on forced redistricting and more on evidence-based strategies that improve student outcomes, strengthen accountability, and stabilize property taxes.

For background, the Lamoille South Supervisory Union serves approximately 1,600 students across seven schools, including the Elmore School, the last one-room schoolhouse in Vermont. Our Elmore-Morristown and Stowe School Districts spend significantly less than the state average while consistently performing above the state in all major academic areas and maintaining relatively low tax rates. We maintain strong capital reserves, minimal debt, high teacher retention, above-average teacher salaries, and facilities that have been maintained over time to minimize the need for significant new capital expenditures. This is made possible by sustained community support, active school boards, and intentional long-term planning.

For many years, our two school districts have worked collaboratively, sharing central office expenses such as special education, facilities, transportation, food service, and business operations. Lamoille South has been financially responsible and student driven, already capturing “efficiencies of scale” through voluntary collaboration rather than top-down mandates. Our supervisory union is providing an excellent education at a reasonable cost to taxpayers, demonstrating that small, well-governed systems can deliver both quality and efficiency.

You have asked me to comment on the maps proposed by Secretary Saunders and Senator Beck. In each of the proposed maps, our two school districts would be required to merge with the Lamoille North and Orleans Southwest Supervisory Unions to create a new district covering more than 600 square miles and serving approximately 4,000 students. This proposal would collapse twelve school boards into one, radically shifting governance structures and local decision making, and it is difficult to see how such a dramatic restructuring would improve educational quality in our two districts or reduce costs for taxpayers.

The risks associated with large-scale, mandatory consolidation are substantial and, as I testified last spring, not supported by the most recent research. In particular, I would highlight five major concerns:

1. **Lack of community support and trust.** Families and community members have consistently opposed forced consolidation efforts, which are politically unpopular and risk map-drawing that protects certain interests over others. Maine offers a recent example of a state that reversed course on large-scale consolidation after years of failed merger attempts and cost savings that never materialized.

2. **Increased long-term costs.** Leveling employee contracts across a large regional district will significantly increase costs to the Education Fund and add long-term liabilities to the pension system. Prior modeling indicates that leveling teacher contracts alone in a proposed Lamoille County district would cost millions of dollars, and Vermont's experience with statewide educator health care negotiations since 2018—where the cost of a family health plan has climbed sharply—illustrates how centralized bargaining can drive costs higher rather than lower.
3. **Unfair redistribution of debt and assets.** Merging districts would require communities to share debt and assets across new geographic boundaries, resulting in some taxpayers paying for bonds they did not approve and inheriting debts that would cut into local education spending. Districts that have built capital reserves through careful planning risk losing those funds into a larger regional pool, undermining incentives for responsible stewardship and worsening the challenge of maintaining Vermont's aging school buildings.
4. **Reduced oversight and weaker support.** A district spanning more than 600 square miles presents serious challenges for adequate oversight, supervision, and principal support. To cover this scale, larger central office structures—assistant superintendents and additional directors—would likely be needed, offsetting any theoretical savings and potentially distancing decision makers from the communities they serve.
5. **Disruption to learning and stability.** Major governance changes and leadership turnover are consistently linked to negative impacts on student achievement, through increased teacher turnover, shifting curricula, culture and climate disruption, and the loss of a clear strategic mission and vision. It often takes several years for a new leadership team to stabilize these disruptions, years in which students only move through the system once.

These risks are compounded by a sixth concern: lack of state-level capacity. A massive reorganization would create a multi-year distraction for an agency already struggling to meet existing mandates, diverting time and energy from literacy, mental health, and workforce development.

In the Governor's address, Mississippi was cited as a model for reform. This state did not consolidate school districts; however, when reviewing their progress, they have made policy choices that combined accountability, investment, and instructional support.

Specifically, Mississippi has:

- Increased accountability, holding districts responsible for student achievement and high-quality instruction, including a promotion policy in which students who do not reach grade level proficiency are retained and receive targeted supports; their data systems make spending and student achievement information readily accessible to the public.
- Increased overall education spending, directing additional resources to the highest poverty districts to raise teacher salaries and provide research-based professional development.
- Implemented systemic literacy reform statewide for all K–3 teachers, including LETRS training, a model now being replicated in Tennessee and other states with similar improvements in reading outcomes.

Vermont is unlikely to embrace mandatory retention based on standardized assessments, and there are good reasons for that. But there are clear lessons we can adapt: rigorous accountability, transparent data, strategic investment, and sustained support for high-quality instruction—approaches currently used in many Vermont districts, including Lamoille South.

With that context, I would offer three areas for your consideration as you weigh how to use this legislative session:

1. **Tax stability and targeted funding reform.** Vermonters have asked for tax reform and stability, not a wholesale restructuring of school governance. The “Tax Revolt” of 2024 was closely aligned with the implementation of Act 127, which districts have now largely adjusted to. Spending control can be accomplished through tools such as the excess spending threshold and more refined modeling of a student-based foundation formula that uses current district structures, supplemented by expert panels to account for Vermont’s rural context and historical spending patterns. If the funding system is improved and expectations are clear, consolidation will be organic, locally supported, and data-informed rather than mandated.
2. **Accountability, transparency, and state-level support.** If Vermont is serious about improving academic achievement, the state must increase accountability, transparency, and state-level support. Taxpayers deserve accessible, understandable information on how students in their local schools perform on state assessments, as well as annual climate surveys and other agreed-upon indicators of school success. Models from states like Massachusetts demonstrate that robust public reporting, clear standards, and targeted assistance to struggling districts can raise performance without a sweeping redrawing of governance maps.
3. **Voluntary consolidation tied to facilities.** Consolidation can make sense in many parts of the state, particularly when tied to modern, efficient school facilities that meet the needs of today’s students. Targeted school construction incentives would lead many districts to consider voluntary consolidation in ways that build on community support instead of undermining it. The second-home tax could be explored as a potential revenue source to support these strategic projects as Vermont responds to declining enrollment and an aging population.

Vermont’s students deserve thoughtful, evidence-based reform that strengthens educational quality, maintains local accountability, and respects the hard work communities have already done to manage costs responsibly. There is a significant opportunity cost in spending an entire legislative session debating maps that are politically unpopular and unlikely to deliver better outcomes for students. Thank you for your time, for your leadership, and for the opportunity to share this perspective on how Vermont can move forward with reforms that matter most in classrooms, not just on maps.

Ryan Heraty
Superintendent