

Good afternoon members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer my thoughts on the work of your Committees and the Legislature this spring. I am Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of Mountain Views Supervisory Union. We are a district of seven communities including the towns of Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Pittsfield, Pomfret, Reading and Woodstock, with just over 1000 students.

In my previous testimony to the Senate and House Education Committees on January 13th, I asked that Vermont Legislators reflect on these three questions in their work.

- Does our work create more equitable educational experiences?
- Is the work supported by evidence?
- Does it expand opportunities for and produce measurable positive impacts on student learning?

And I would ask one more question in the consideration of redistricting Vermont Public Schools:

- Who are we serving in the creation of these maps?

As I respond to the questions you have presented to me, I will keep these at the forefront of my testimony as I believe they serve as a compass in the creation of a vision for Vermont Public Education.

On January 15th in her presentation of the Agency of Education's proposed redistricting maps to the Committee, Secretary Saunders offered her vision for redistricting. These maps, based on VSBA Regions and identified Comprehensive High Schools, range in size from approximately 4000 to 12,000 students. The justification for these new Supervisory Unions was that it kept together current SU/SDs, contained at least one comprehensive high school, and met the expectation of balancing property wealth.

What I did not see in her testimony was how these new lines address equity of educational experiences for students. By maintaining current SUs/SDs, the AOE is perpetuating the stated concerns, i.e. limited educational opportunities and access to high quality education. Rather than addressing the root causes of poor student outcomes, we are instead reorganizing the existing structures into mega districts with the expectation that students will now do better and the State will save money. There is no evidence that supervisory unions, at the scale proposed in this model, will address these critical needs.

These maps were created based on the premise that larger is better. And not larger by merging SUs/SDs with a shared educational purpose and established relationships, but larger to hit an arbitrary student population that is not based on evidence. I have the lived experience of creating a Supervisory District from a Supervisory Union through a voluntary merger. Even when there exists a kinship between communities, the process feels like a loss for the families and citizens of these towns. Community members expect to have access to "their" Superintendent when they have a question about the budget, a safety issue with a school, or why there was a snow day. The direct connection between those served and the individuals in charge of educating students would be lost if our SUs/SDs grow to the size proposed by Secretary Saunders.

Equally as important as reimagining the role and responsibilities of the Central Office in Districts of 4,000 to 12,000 students, is the stated intent of reducing educational costs. The Secretary continues to sidestep this stated purpose of Act 73, to realize economic efficiencies. Whether we are addressing the needs of 2000 or 11,936 students, responsibilities still exist in the adherence of State and Federal policies, compliance with Legislative mandates, commitments in Collective Bargaining agreements, and the creation of a vibrant learning community. The names may change from those in charge from Superintendents to Assistant Superintendents, Directors of Finance to Assistant Directors, or Director of Human Resources to Human Resources Managers, but the tasks remain to address the needs of students as well as the Faculty and Staff. Again, there is limited evidence that supports the belief that a Supervisory Union, at the scale presented by the Secretary, would realize the stated fiscal reductions.

So, I return to my added question, who does this map serve? Clearly not the students as we haven't even set benchmarks to assess what we want from our schools. As the administration moves farther and farther away from the classroom, how do we expect Superintendents to be the Instructional Leaders they need to be to truly serve the students of their communities. How do Superintendents not become so removed from the day to day challenges that they become middle management for the Agency of Education?

During my January 13th testimony to the Legislative Education Committees, I clearly and boldly stated my thoughts regarding Supervisory Unions as compared to Supervisory Districts. Supervisory Unions serve the adults. Supervisory Districts serve students. I can make that statement because of my work to move a Supervisory Union to a merged District. Our seven communities made the brave decision to become a Supervisory District. This merge allowed us to realize a:

- Unified contract
- Unified curriculum
- Unified Strategic Plan, Portrait of a Graduate, and Educational Policies
- Unified instructional practices
- Unified Board that allowed the Superintendent to serve as an Instructional Leader
- Unified budget that supports the stated priorities of the Strategic Plan
- Unified faculty and staff who are knowledgeable of the District priorities

In my experience, the term unified is synonymous with the terms opportunity, efficiency and effectiveness.

This was not an easy process. Loss of Board control was a primary concern for our eight Boards and their citizens. These fears have not been realized due to the work of the merged Board that resulted in impressive growth in student outcomes and improved faculty retention. This merge did not close schools but it did allow us to reimagine instructional spaces that better reflected our Portrait of a Graduate. The eighteen School Board members now have a broader vision of the District, and confidence in the capacity of the Leadership Team. Once we became a merged district, the schools and educators benefited from a clear, coherent message of our purpose, and a learning culture based on reflective practices.

None of this could have happened as an Supervisory Union with 8 separate districts and Boards. Only as a Supervisory District could all of our students achieve this level of success. Superintendents cannot act as Instructional Leaders when serving the demands of multiple board

In reviewing Senator Beck's CTE map presented to you on January 20th and previously to the Redistricting Task Force, I again reflect on the question of who this map is serving. Does it maintain preexisting small Supervisory Unions so they continue to operate to serve the adults and not the students? I affirm that CTEs hold a significant role in the education of a portion of our student population, but they are not the majority of students who chose other learning opportunities. This map represents the same character flaws as that presented by the Secretary. There is no presented evidence that it addresses the core tenants of Act 73 by improving the equity of educational experiences and realizing cost efficiencies. Where are the expanded opportunities? How do these mega districts emphasize existing regional relationships? Where are the cost efficiencies? Creating new districts goes beyond drawing lines around a map to support an individual bias. Our communities, families and students are asking for change but not at the expense of quality of learning in Vermont.

I value and appreciate your last questions. They demonstrate to me the commitment of this committee to make decisions informed by those closest to the issue and based on reliable data. I defer to the Redistricting Task Force Legislative Report that best represents my beliefs on redistricting. They noted these "key values" as they made their recommendations. They are:

- "the need for stronger regional cooperation,
- reliance on evidence and data,
- equitable access to high-quality education,
- meaningful attention to community voices, and
- solutions that reflect the unique challenges and strengths of Vermont's rural geography."

With these guide posts, I believe that maps can be drawn that address Vermont's expectations and offer a strong vision for Public Education.

Mountain Views Supervisory District demonstrated their commitment to forming strong regional relationships through its membership to the Vermont Learning Collaborative and by engaging in discussions with Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union and Hartford School District on collaboration. We have created a Comprehensive High School for our seven District towns and 20 other communities whose children chose to attend Woodstock Union High School for their education. This opportunity to self determine our future is core to the respect of community voices.

The progressive actions taken by MVSD serve not only our students but those around us. By leaning hard into improving student literacy, mathematics and social emotional outcomes, MVSD has stabilized student enrollment both within our towns and also from our surrounding communities. By offering diverse student experiences both academically and vocationally, our students and families see success in their futures. By establishing a culture based on mutual respect, an environment has been created where students and faculty want to come to learn and work every day. MVSD is privileged to have a thriving district and we acknowledge the responsibility to ensure that students from other SUs/SDs have the same experience. This is what

a voluntary, strategic merger looks like. The emphasis is on educational benefit, community priorities, and fiscal sustainability.

MVSD has been aggressive in establishing its vision for Public Education as it took advantage of the opportunities of Act 46. I concur that not all SUs/SDs are ready for this kind of change. I would argue however that our students can't wait any longer.

Rather than attending to the arbitrary deadline of having new maps by the end of this Legislative session, I would advocate instead that the Legislature take the time necessary to create a pathway forward which would achieve the educational equity and economic efficiency promised in Act 73. This framework would include a transparent process that requires clear data and authentic community involvement. Policies need to address the legitimate cost drivers of Public Education - health care, special education and aging facilities. Mergers must be seen as an opportunity to achieve shared goals through phased transitions that are tied to local identities. Whether incentivized or mandated, combining smaller districts and unions to make intentional, evidence-based improvements will strengthen Public Education in Vermont.

Again, I appreciate the Senate Education Committee's eagerness to engage with those in the field to partner in the work of improving student outcomes and opportunities in Vermont. I ask that we continue to hold ourselves accountable to these focusing questions of intentionality and purpose as we move forward. Our goals are shared, our commitment is true and the time is now. Thank you.