

My name is Stacey Peters; I'm the chair of the Granville-Hancock Unified school district representing our two isolated towns along Route 100 in Addison County, where we made the difficult decision to close our small village schools in 2009 and now tuition all of the students in our district. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my perspective to the committee today. **It's a perspective I don't think you've heard much about, but a perspective that is relevant to the current statewide discussion around the future of our education system.**

You have heard plenty of testimony about how "we are all rural," but I want to set the stage by defining what rural looks like in my district. Hancock and Granville are towns surrounded by state and federal lands. About 85% of Hancock is owned by the Green Mountain National Forest, and another 10% is privately conserved. Granville is over 50% conserved. There are 9 people per square mile in Hancock, and only 6 per square mile in Granville.

Choice is often spoken of as a luxury or a tax-dodging loophole, and indeed in the national discourse it has become synonymous with privilege and inequality. But the reality in our small, isolated rural towns is that choice is not a luxury - it is a necessity if our towns are to survive. I'd like to take a few minutes and let you know what this looks like in my district, where I represent between 80 and 100 students between the two towns in any given year..

Our children attend one of 21 schools in the area. In the ten years I've been on the board, between 0 and 9% choose independent schools. The overwhelming majority of our students attend a public school located in the direction caregivers travel for work. And our caregivers - nearly all of us - travel for work, as our towns, in no small part thanks to having closed our village schools, have become employment deserts.

When I moved to the area, Hancock was home to the usual small-town businesses; we had a rescue service serving the valley, a small care home employing health care staff, a building supply store and lumber yard, and a B and B. Our neighbors in Granville had a public house and a general store. All of these businesses have shuttered since closing our schools.

I know that the conversations you're having have stemmed from the reality of population decline, but I can tell you through the example of the towns in my district that closing schools and sending kids farther away to school does not reverse population decline; it exacerbates it.

We will never get our schools back, nor the businesses we lost.

When the difficult decisions to close our schools were being made, our families were offered choice, not as a means of sending our kids to private out-of-state boarding schools on the town dime, but to allow our working families to stay together during the day, and to give our kids the best possible shot at integrating with their school communities.

We are very fortunate, then, that the Supervisory Union governance structure allows us to support this reality. As members of the White River Valley SU, we are offered shared resources from the SU Central Office, as well as a voice at the larger SU board table. We are able, as a

board, to find creative solutions to problems that directly help our families, who are our neighbors and whom we know. We benefit from the shared resources of a superintendent, a business manager, and technology support. We work closely with these education professionals to find solutions to the problems our community members bring to us, which comprises everything from absenteeism and transportation to issues around food insecurity and access to driver's education. And, because we were given this concession of school choice when we last consolidated and closed our schools, as caregivers we do not have to choose whether to educate our children or earn a living.

In the maps presented by the chair of the House Committee on Education a few weeks ago, Granville and Hancock were removed from the WRVSU and attached to a Harwood district. Our small district would be dissolved and our children would be bussed into Harwood's schools.

That district's new board, which likely would objectively not include members from our small towns, would then decide the fate of the neighboring small schools around us, and be allowed to close them.

I cannot stress enough — in our towns you will find families who work in Middlebury, in Randolph, in Royalton, and in West Lebanon, all well over an hour's drive from Harwood's schools. This is not tenable for our working families, who would then be upwards of two hours away when their kids are at school in Waterbury. If school is called early for weather, or for a security issue, or for illness, parents will lose work in order to accommodate this. Because of the nature of our necessary employment travel, this issue remains regardless of what larger district you place us. Our livelihoods depend on the flexibility we currently have.

Lastly, I will add that I appreciate the hard work you've done thinking through implementation of Act 73. Nobody understands the need for funding reform like the residents of our towns, which saw 2024 tax increases of nearly 40% for reasons that are beyond our control, and our residents are amongst those voices calling for tax relief. That relief was promised to us under Act 46 and clearly it wasn't delivered. I hope you will:

- strongly consider the fate of those of us in towns who have already made these consolidation decisions,
- maintain the supervisory union structure where it works effectively in our most isolated rural towns, and
- allow us to continue to make the decisions that best serve our own families and neighbors.

Dissolving our SU and dropping us into a larger district would turn our employment deserts into ghost towns, while not guaranteeing tax relief and not serving our children. We may not operate a school building, but we do have school children, and it is incumbent on you to implement legislation that does not ignore those children who are already amongst the most disenfranchised.

Attachments: maps of Hancock and Granville; the yellow shading represents conserved lands.

