



**Rural School Community Alliance
SIX LIMITATIONS OF HOUSE 454
April 2025**

The Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA) appreciates the effort lawmakers have made to respond to the concerns raised by Vermonters about the financing of our education system. Unfortunately, H454 is deeply concerning in its implications for educational equity, local democracy, and the well-being of our children, families and rural communities.

RSCA'S Six Limitations of H454

1. H454 diminishes democratic engagement, weakening Vermont's education system as a whole.
2. District size numbers in H454 are arbitrary and unworkable in parts of rural Vermont, due to population density and geography.
3. The purpose of class size minimums in H454 is unclear, unfair and unwise.
4. The proposed school sizes at the secondary level in H454 are inconsistent with current operation by grade level and potentially not aligned with Vermont's vision for the future of public education.
5. H454 disadvantages rural children and families who live in non-operating districts from accessible schools.
6. Mechanisms of H454 will force school closure, but H454 is silent on the process to close schools and the impacts of school closure. This silence is deafening and will result in consequences which will impact children, families and communities causing direct harm to public education in Vermont.

1. H454 Diminishes democratic engagement, weakening Vermont's education system as a whole.

At a critical time in Vermont's and our nation's history, H. 454 proposes a dramatic shift away from Vermont's functioning system of local democratic engagement in school governance. The bill moves toward centralizing decision-making into fewer school boards with reduced local representation, which would separate communities from decisions that directly impact their children and their schools. Our current system is relatively weak when it comes to accountability. Removing community oversight, a vital check and balance, weakens our current education system further by distancing accountability from the local level.

2. District size numbers in H454 are arbitrary and unworkable in parts of rural Vermont, due to population density and geography.

Arbitrary numbers such as district sizes of 4000 students are simplistic and laden with the erroneous assumption that the miracle of scale will be the answer to Vermont's problems. Where is the comprehensive evidence to support this notion? We have yet to see it. The last report to the legislature on Act 46 from 2020 only contained anecdotal information from seven of the 111 school districts impacted by the law and was not released until 2024. Unverified assumptions are not a solid foundation on which to build transformative change.

Prioritize cost and quality over scale. The effectiveness of supervisory services—whether in supervisory unions (SUs) or supervisory districts (SDs)—should be evaluated based on cost and quality per student, not solely on scale.

- Vermont data does not support the assumption that larger scale automatically improves cost efficiency or educational quality.
- Given the unique rural realities of the state, scale must be assessed with an emphasis on measurable cost and quality outcomes, rather than arbitrary size benchmarks.
- Just as school performance is judged by cost and quality, rather than sheer enrollment numbers, the same principle should apply to governance structures.

Account for transition costs. Along with analysis of current conditions, the financial implications of a transition to differently configured and/or larger educational units must be carefully assessed. A thoughtful, Vermont-specific, data-driven approach is essential to preserving the quality and sustainability of Vermont's public education system.

- Any redistricting recommendations should include a detailed estimate of transition costs associated with restructuring existing governance models.
- Without careful financial planning, education restructuring could inadvertently increase costs rather than improve efficiency.

The power of local knowledge to inform change. Appointed commissions can help move forward policy changes but H454 has no mechanism for informing the suggested subcommittee of the Commission on the Future of Public Education with the information. Necessary to make decisions. This could lead to expensive mistakes. Local supervisory unions and school districts can supply this information given a standardized format in which to present it.

3. The purpose of class size minimums in H454 is unclear, unfair and unwise.

Superintendents, school principals and school boards regularly monitor enrollment trends. **Whether or not school and class sizes are sustainable is complex** and tends to involve more than one or more group of students being under enrolled over

a two-year period. Metrics for identifying unsustainable schools need to be comprehensive and include an analysis of factors such as school quality, per pupil costs, and an updated annual census of 1 to 4-year-olds anticipated. Sustainability planning is necessary to provide a comprehensive picture for schools, districts and communities considering decisions on school closure.

- We are unaware of policy models that use class size minimums by other US states.
- In H454 the numbers vary by grade and do not align with how most Vermont schools operate K-6 and K-8 and would therefore need correcting.
- In rural schools, cohorts of students tend to advance with little variability; therefore, in a single school, it is not practical to have (as in H454) a minimum that increases or decreases from one grade to the next.
- Flexibility and educational judgement are keys to effective grade level grouping and staffing. Decisions are made at the elementary level based on child development and optimal groups, including discussion about individual children and their best placement. Professional judgement in decision making is a key element and consequently targets for class sizes are more appropriate than minimum numbers.
- At this time, RSCA does not recommend class size minimums be included in legislation.

4. The proposed school sizes at the secondary level in H454 are inconsistent with current operation by grade level and potentially not aligned with Vermont's vision for the future of public education.

The Commission for the Future of Public Education in Vermont was charged with developing a vision. This work has, due to contracting delays, barely begun. The 1st meeting facilitated by the consultants hired to assist the Commission with their task took place in April 2025. While prior meetings have gathered evidence compiled by Commission members, this process has a long way to go prior to completion.

As proposed in H454, having fixed numbers of 450 students is arbitrary. Schools need to meet cost and quality standards and can demonstrate they can do so in a variety of configurations and sizes. K-8 schools, middle schools plus 9-12 facilities and 7-12 facilities can all demonstrate quality and cost effectiveness given an accountability system to do so. Currently we have clear standards and expectations for students. Local flexibility to meet those clear standards and reach goals is important. Equity and equality are not the same. We do not need to promote uniformity to meet clear expectations around quality and cost. Uniformity does not translate to equality. We recommend completion and publication of the Commission's Vision for the Future of Public Education prior to promoting solutions

for secondary education. Unverified assumptions about scale as an answer to systemic issues are an insufficient basis for changing Vermont's secondary education system at this time.

RSCA calls for collaborative solutions, not imposed remedies for ill-defined problems. Collaboration which taps into the hope and dreams of Vermonters for their children can result in practical, achievable plans. Similar to Union High School development 50 plus years ago, each supervisory union and school district within a Career Technical Education (CTE) center region should convene educators, community members, school board members and youth to develop a robust and practical plan for secondary education between existing schools, communities and career technical centers. Innovative opportunities should be considered, for example, the use of smaller facilities as specialist academies in areas like the arts or sciences. Facilitation in plan development should be provided. The final document which would phase in change over time should be adopted by school boards and voted on by communities in the region prior to implementation.

5. H454 disadvantages rural children and families who live in non-operating districts from accessible schools. Maintain flexibility for non-operating school districts.

Vermont's low-population regions include many communities that do not operate their own schools due to past public-school closures. Families in these areas often travel long distances for their children's education, with their options influenced by employment, transportation, and regional access. School closures in neighboring communities could significantly increase travel burdens for families in non-operating districts. Vermont must carefully assess the risk of creating education deserts before making school closure decisions that could impact non-operating communities. Non-operating districts should retain the flexibility of school choice for their students within parameters defined by the state. Interstate exemptions should be included to accommodate students who may need to attend schools across state lines due to geographic constraints.

6. Mechanisms of H454 will force school closure, but H454 is silent on the process to close schools and the impacts of school closure for children. This silence is deafening and will result in consequences which will impact children, families and communities causing direct harm to public education in Vermont.

The combination of larger districts, less representation, goals for minimum class and district size without the protection of a vote of the town impacted, will result in H454 driving rural school closures statewide. Evidence is clear that closing schools will not fix Vermont's problems. Instead, it can create damaging new ones. While we acknowledge unsustainable schools need to develop plans for alternative education opportunities, we have a choice as a state regarding how we approach school closure.

Acknowledge the contribution of Vermont's community elementary schools of all sizes for their central role in the education of young children and their contribution to thriving communities. In their 2007 study, *Review of Empirical Evidence about School Size Effects*, Leithwood and Jantzi looked at prior research on educational outcomes in relation to school size. With respect to student academic achievement, they concluded: "Smaller schools are generally better for most purposes. The weight of evidence provided by the review clearly favors smaller schools for a wide array of student outcomes and most organizational outcomes as well." They also reviewed studies on outcomes related to student engagement and concluded: "The results of all studies indicate significantly stronger student engagement in smaller as compared with larger schools." Measures of engagement included connectedness and belonging, participation in activities, and school attachment.

Support schools facing enrollment decline. The AOE should provide resources to districts responding to enrollment decline in schools of all sizes. A multiage philosophy has historically been a successful approach in Vermont schools; it is developmentally appropriate for young children. The AOE, supported by a cadre of Vermont practitioners with experience in multiage settings, could be directed to provide technical assistance for schools that, due to enrollment decline, wish to implement a mix of grade level and multiage classrooms or additional strategies in response to enrollment decline.

Support community schools with unsustainable enrollment. Future planning is essential for schools. School communities must investigate new options if projected enrollment approaches unsustainable levels. Proactive planning should be encouraged. Declining enrollment leading to potential unsustainability of an elementary school should trigger incentives for facilitation support to develop Education Sustainability Plans. Organizations such as Vermont Council for Rural Development (VCRD) and Vermont Rural Education Collaborative (VREC) should be incentivized to develop an Education Sustainability Toolkit and workshop series in communities. The planning should explore potential changes including collaboration with neighbors, and repurposing as childcare, preschool, and K-2 or K-4 settings. Additionally, enhanced affordable housing opportunities for young families could be encouraged. Developed with community involvement and approved by the school board, this approach could help communities be proactive in the face of enrollment decline. We need multiple proactive responses; this is not the time to abandon communities; it is the time to help them reinvent and emerge stronger.

Clarify geographic isolation. Clearly articulated geographic isolation criteria based on population density, square mileage town to town and maximum length of bus rides scaled by age can designate geographically isolated towns with recognition as "essential" rural schools. This would stabilize staffing and administrative uncertainty and allow isolated rural communities to focus on school improvement.

Recognize that closing schools without due process has consequences. Only an inclusive open-minded analysis of the pros and cons of closure results in a decision that

is supported by the majority of voters. Sufficient time to clarify a path forward, and plan for the future, can mitigate some of the consequences of closure. We recommend you consider H180 as a starting point.

It is possible to close a school with community support, Vermont has a long history of doing so. We recommend that legislators take testimony on this topic from Mara Tieken of Bates College, John Castle of VREC, principals, teachers and additional RSCA community members.

Research on school closure shows:

Closing schools is damaging to children. Studies of school closures show that students:

- Experience a loss of connectedness with peers and community.
- Face increased mental health challenges.
- In the short term, have lower test scores, worse attendance, and behavioral issues.
- In the long term, are less likely than their peers to complete college and secure a job.
- Face negative impacts from declining family and community engagement.

Closing schools does not save money. Children from closed schools need an education. National research shows that per pupil spending tends to increase post-closure, while anticipated cost efficiencies from “economies of scale” rarely materialize. Transportation costs increase, wider opportunities promised cost money, and empty public buildings need to be maintained. School closures tend to result in the redistribution of money away from the direct education of students rather than financial savings.

Closing schools impacts equity. Research finds that students experiencing poverty, students of color, and those with special needs are most negatively impacted by school closures.

Closing schools negatively impacts communities. In communities where schools are closed, research points to depopulation, declining home values, eroding social capital, and problems with attracting and retaining families with children.

Closing schools without due process has consequences. Only an inclusive open-minded analysis of the pros and cons of closure results in a decision that is supported by the majority of voters. Sufficient time to clarify a path forward, and plan for the future, can avoid some unintended consequences. Examples include excessively long bus rides and abandoned school buildings with no clear educational plan for their re-use.

Research Summary

Closing Schools

Revisiting Research on School Closings: Key Learnings for District and Community Leaders: <https://tinyurl.com/47jh7sse>

The Harm of School Closures Can Last a Lifetime, New Research Shows
<https://tinyurl.com/53ezcd92>

Rethinking the School Closure Research: School Closure as Spatial Injustice
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1233167>

What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York <https://tinyurl.com/yretevfy>

Do rural school closures lead to local population decline?
<https://tinyurl.com/42kyx934>

Why local leaders should champion “community schools” to improve student, family, and neighborhood well-being <https://tinyurl.com/2572reka>

Top Benefits of Family and Community Engagement <https://tinyurl.com/mpayp9fa>

Belonging Boosts Kids’ Mental Health <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhe4vd>

School Connectedness Helps Students Thrive <https://tinyurl.com/mv3sb7ra>

How Community Schools Make a Difference <https://tinyurl.com/489hkx7z>

A lot of roads to cover as schools close some kids face longer bus rides
<https://tinyurl.com/4j5br2mw>

Study links longer bus rides to chronic absenteeism
<https://tinyurl.com/2s48rcy5>

Long School Bus Rides Stealing the Joy of Childhood
<https://tinyurl.com/mr4x2mkj>