

Vermont Senate
Senate Education Committee (H.454)

Testimony of Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, White River Valley Supervisory Union

My name is Jamie Kinnarney, and this is my fifth year serving as the Superintendent of Schools of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. Prior to serving as Superintendent of Schools, I had the privilege of serving as the Williamstown Schools Principal for seven years. I want to begin by once again thanking the Senate Education Committee for allowing me to testify on H.454 this afternoon. I will refer to our supervisory union as the WRVSU for the remainder of my testimony.

I want to focus my testimony today on my concerns specific to the provisions provided via H.454 regarding section 3 Scale Intent (A) Class Size Standards and section 7 School Size Intent. The beginning of section 3 of H.454 states, "It is the intent of the General Assembly to transform education in Vermont by leveraging attainable and research-based scale to increase equity of opportunity and promote efficiency and affordability."

I want to begin by pointing out that the definition of equity does not mean equality or that we are going to create public schools that ensure everyone will have the exact same classroom experience. Instead, I have dedicated my entire career to advocating for the importance of the personalization of the educational experience. I believe that the class size minimums introduced into H.454 are nothing more than a tool for larger, depersonalized district Boards to have the means to act on closing smaller elementary, middle, or high schools within a newly formed unified district. I believe this because we have proof that this has already occurred within some unified districts that formed in haste due to Act 46 (what felt like forced mergers), and it will most definitely occur again if we are to deliver on the property tax relief proffered as the reason for why we need to transform Vermont's public education system once again.

The class sizes provided via the bill does not take into account significant cost drivers. For example, it doesn't take into account academic interventionists, behavioral support services, paraeducator supports, mental health supports, or related service provider

supports. Yet, when you look at the increase in FTEs that my colleague Ryan Heraty provided you a few weeks back from across the state, the areas that have grown the most are excluded from this provision of the bill.

Increase in FTE from 2020-2024 as provided via AOE FTE Report:

Behavioral Specialist: 71

Behavior Interventionist: 145

Reading Interventionist: 158

Math Interventionist: 103

In-service Training Staff (non-instructional): 62

I share this information to be clear, we need to get a lot better at how we measure efficiency, and equity needs to stand for more than only utilizing average class sizes that would more than likely close the Newton School in Strafford, VT. The Newton School has a long history of serving its students in a fiscally responsible manner that delivers high-quality student outcomes. Newton School traditionally performs well above the state standards in math, literacy, and science. It also qualifies as a Title I receiving school. Yet, due to the intention of creating equity, H.454 determines that Newton can not meet our students' needs, based on the class size minimum standards.

I have a great deal of trouble with the provision within H.454 that allows for a newly formed unified district Board to apply for a waiver if a school doesn't meet the class size minimums. That process relies again on a depersonalized Board to advocate for that rural community school, and the definition for geographic isolation is yet to be determined. That school could end up closed because of its size and nothing to do with academic and social/emotional performance metrics, community satisfaction, or efficiency in regards to per-pupil cost.

I also remain concerned with the arbitrary nature of indicating that it is the intent to create schools that operate grades 6-12 to have a minimum average daily membership of 450 students. I have the same concern with this requirement as I do with the minimum class size numbers, because it communicates that a school of 260 students can not provide the same high-quality education as a school with 450 students. My experience as a Principal and Superintendent would indicate that this isn't true. I shared with you testimony two weeks ago about the success of the White River Unified District. That success is evident in student achievement, increased graduation rates, and fiscal responsibility; yet, this provision indicates that the 365 average daily membership of the White River Unified District 6-12 isn't providing for an optimal educational experience. I would argue that our community and the surrounding communities that tuition in over 80 students in grades 6-12 have a differing opinion.

I would also be remiss today if I didn't mention how important I believe it is to include the Supervisory Union as a viable governance structure moving forward. My previous testimony focused on that, so I wanted to re-emphasize this, but not speak to all of my reasons to support the SU structure and the equity for which it allows. It is my hope that you continue to advocate for the viability of Supervisory Unions and include them in any bill that you move forward for reconciliation with the House.

Finally, I ask that we ensure that any bill we move forward has the accountability measures built within it to ensure greater personalization, increased outcomes for our students, results in increased financial efficiencies because all schools are held to the same accountability standards, and doesn't indicate via the provisions provided that smaller schools are resulting in less equity, increased costs, and undesired outcomes.

I strongly urge you to strike any/all language provided within H.454 Class Size Standards and School Size Intent.

Respectfully submitted,

Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, WRVSU