Subject: Act 73 must explicitly protect and preserve school choice

Sent: Tuesday 5/5/2026 2:17 PM

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Act 73 must explicitly protect and preserve school choice. Without that protection, families like mine are at risk of losing access to the education that is working for our children today.

Key points:

- Act 73 must explicitly preserve school choice in rural Vermont
- School choice is essential to access, workforce development, and community stability in the NEK
- Restricting access will result in families and businesses leaving the region

I am writing to you as a parent, a business owner, and a Northeast Kingdom resident of more than 20 years. I am also part of a growing group of parent and community volunteers working to ensure that the realities of rural Vermont are fully understood in this conversation. In the Northeast Kingdom, our education system has never been one size fits all. It has been built intentionally over generations to reflect the realities of rural life, our geography, our population, and the needs of our communities. Public schools and independent schools have coexisted here for well over a century, working in parallel to ensure that students have access to education that fits.

We support our public schools, we support our independent schools. **We support all of our educators**. Many are multi generation Vermonters who grew up here, built careers here, and are now raising their own children within this same system. Some choose public school pathways. Others choose independent schools. Still others have chosen to move here, despite the challenges of rural life, because of the exceptional access to both public and independent school pathways. **That is not division. That is strength**. That is what a functioning system looks like. The narrative that this is a "public versus independent" issue does not reflect the reality on the ground here in the NEK.

It is also important to ground this conversation in facts. Independent schools serve approximately 4% of Vermont's student population and account for just 3% of total education spending. **Most of these students are in communities where a public option does not exist.** This is not a system driving cost. It is a system ensuring access where it would otherwise not exist. Our system is a system filling gaps.

Our recent survey of more than 350 Northeast Kingdom families, representing a broad cross section of our communities, reinforces this:

- 51.7% of families cited academic opportunity as a primary reason for their school choice
- 45.8% cited the impact on the local economy as an important piece of school choice

- 37.7% cited geography and transportation realities as a critical part of their school choice pathway

These are not preferences or luxury. These are the conditions of rural life.

We heard directly from families:

- "A daily commute of over an hour each way would create significant financial strain and remove opportunities that have been central to my children's success."
- "We would not stay in the NEK."
- "School choice is a primary recruiting tool for NEK employers."

That last point cannot be overstated.

In the Northeast Kingdom, our schools are not only educational anchors. They are workforce development engines. They introduce students to the trades, healthcare, communications, and other critical career pathways early, often before graduation. They help students build real, employable skills and connections that keep them rooted here. For local businesses, including my own family's, this system is essential. It creates a pipeline of skilled, motivated young people who are prepared to enter the workforce, contribute to the economy, and build their lives in this region. When you reduce access to these schools, you are not just changing education. You are directly impacting workforce development, business sustainability, and the long term viability of rural communities. The proposals being considered, whether through consolidation, assignment models, or restrictive eligibility requirements, would not simply adjust the system. They would reduce access. In rural Vermont, when access is reduced, it is often lost entirely. The downstream impacts are clear:

- Increased financial and logistical strain on families
- Loss of workforce recruitment and retention tools for local businesses
- Population decline as families relocate
- Reduced programs, trades, and opportunities for students

There is also a growing concern that this is becoming an attack on rural Vermont, whether intentional or not. It feels as though our communities are being overlooked, misunderstood, or treated as though our children, our homes, and our businesses do not carry the same weight in this conversation. Policies that may appear workable in more densely populated regions do not translate here.

This is what that looks like in real life:

My husband is a multi generation Vermonter. He was born and raised in St. Johnsbury, attended local public K-8 schools, and then graduated from St. Johnsbury Academy in 2002. He is exactly the type of student who could have slipped through the cracks. He could have disengaged, failed to graduate, or taken a very different path. Instead, he was met by educators who saw him, cared about him, and refused to give up on him. They introduced him to the trades. They taught him a skill, and he turned it into a career. Today, almost 25 years later, he owns and operates an electrical contracting company that serves this same community. He employs almost two dozen Vermont men and women,

offers health insurance and retirement benefits, and has built a workforce rooted in pride and purpose.

He did not grow up wealthy, neither of his parents have a college degree, nor does he. Both of his parents worked full time during his childhood. His story reflects what we see across our region and directly challenges the narrative that independent schools are elitist or only serve wealthy families. They serve students who need opportunity, structure, and someone willing to invest in their future.

Our oldest son, we adopted through foster care. He was born here in St. Johnsbury and exposed to substance abuse in utero. He was put into foster care at 3 months old, and adopted by us when he was 2. He faced years of mental health challenges, significant learning disadvantages, and has received special education services since he was a toddler. He also attended St. Johnsbury Academy, where his needs were met with care, expertise, and consistency. He, too, could have been a student who gave up on himself. Instead, he was supported in a way that helped him build confidence and stability. Today, he is 21, living independently in our community, and contributing positively through his career with a communications utility company.

His experience directly challenges the narrative that independent schools do not serve students with special education needs. He was not an easy student, academically or behaviorally, and yet he was consistently supported, included, and given opportunities to grow in meaningful and productive ways. His IEP was always respected, followed, and exceptionally accomodated.

My two middle children are currently in 12th and 9th grade at St. Johnsbury Academy. They are both high achieving students who have been given opportunities that reflect the very best of what education can offer. My daughter, in her sophomore year, traveled to Ghana through a school-led experiential learning opportunity. She worked with orphans and studied alongside a nurse providing care in a third world setting. She funded that experience herself, writing letters and asking family and friends to support her in place of traditional birthday or holiday gifts. That experience shaped her future. She plans to pursue nursing and hopes to return to the Northeast Kingdom to provide compassionate care to this community. She was recently accepted to an outstanding college, in their honors program. Her education at SJA prepared her for this next chapter. My son, now in 9th grade, has had the strongest academic year of his life. He is challenged, engaged, and supported both as a high achieving student and as an athlete preparing for his future.

Together, their experiences reflect the diversity of learners within a single household. The combination of academic rigor and real-world, experiential learning is what allows schools like St. Johnsbury Academy to meet students where they are and help them grow into who they can become. **This is not a system that serves one type of student.** It is a system that serves many, and it does so exceptionally well.

My youngest child is in 4th grade. And I can tell you, as clearly as I can, just as more than 350 families shared in our survey, if access to these educational opportunities is taken away, we will not stay in Vermont. That is not a threat. It is the reality that I am begging you to understand, as you consider the decisions in front of you.

In the NEK, we are not divided. We are demonstrating that public and independent options can coexist and serve students effectively. That is not something to dismantle. It is something to protect.

- **We are asking you to take a clear position of advocacy.**
- **We are asking you to oppose any legislation, amendments, or structural changes that restrict school choice, eliminate tuitioning, impose forced assignment models, or otherwise reduce access for rural communities.**
- **We are asking you to ensure that Act 73 is implemented in a way that explicitly protects and preserves school choice, particularly in regions where it is essential to access, workforce development, and community stability.**
- **We are not asking for more. We are asking you to protect what already works for our children, our communities, and the future of rural Vermont.**

Rural Vermont is not asking to be reimagined. We are asking to be understood and not unintentionally harmed by policies that do not reflect how we live, work, and educate our children. I recognize this is a lengthy message, and I sincerely appreciate your time, attention, and commitment to the education of all Vermont students.

Respectfully,
Brooke Pierce
Waterford Resident & Mom of 4
Vermont Business Owner