



Testimony by Cheryl Charles, Ph.D.
April 29, 2026
To the Senate Committee on Education

Good afternoon. I am Cheryl Charles, from Westminster, Vermont, speaking to you today in my role as Chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union (WNESU) School Board and Chair of the Westminster Town School District Board. I am here today to talk about our school boards' participation in the first Cooperative Educational Service Area (CESA) approved by the Vermont Agency of Education—the Vermont Learning Collaborative.

Topics

- I will start by drawing from testimony I gave to you in January of 2026 about Cooperative Educational Service Areas (CESAs), just as a brief refresher for background.
- I will also offer some description of the characteristics of supervisory school districts, supervisory unions, and CESAs, and how they effectively co-exist and collaborate.
- And I will give you specific examples of the cost savings and improved services for educators and students that we are already seeing through the Vermont Learning Collaborative, and specifically in the WNESU.

Southeast Vermont Pilot

The Southeast Vermont BOCES proposal grew out of the work of the Vermont Learning Collaborative, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed to support collaboration among school systems in the southern part of the state, particularly north and south near the Connecticut River. You have just heard from the executive director, Jill Graham, and Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of the Mountain Views Supervisory Union, both of whom were instrumental in forming this first CESA in Vermont.

With the passage of Act 168, the school systems which had already been working together for years in the Vermont Learning Collaborative developed Articles of Agreement for a Southeast Vermont BOCES. The members of this new BOCES, now referred to as a CESA, are Mountain Views Supervisory Union, Springfield School District, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union, Two Rivers Supervisory Union, Windham Central Supervisory Union, and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. According to AOE data, there are more than 9000 students who are served by this CESA.

The Articles of Agreement were developed over many months, and extensively reviewed by AOE staff and counsel. By December of 2025, all supervisory unions and school districts in the Collaborative had signed the Articles, after review, discussion and votes to participate which took place in warned meetings of our respective school boards. Our proposal for formal recognition was formally approved by the AOE on January 7, 2026. I have attached Secretary Saunders' approval memo to my Testimony. Also attached are the complete Articles of Agreement with the signatures of those of us serving as Board Chairs in the member supervisory unions and school district.

Supervisory Unions, Districts and CESAs

Governance Area	Supervisory Union	Supervisory District
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two or more school districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One school district, often the result of mergers
Governing Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each member district has at least one representative • Typically equal or nearly equal representation (e.g., 3 reps) for all operating districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same rules as for any school board • Union/merged SDs must have proportional representation by town/city
School District Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each SU member district develops its own budget (assisted by SU business office) adopted by individual school board • Member townspeople vote their own budget, often at Town Meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single district budget, developed by SD and adopted by SD board • No separate local/town school budgets in a merged SD • One budget vote, regardless of number of towns/cities in the SD, typically at an Annual Meeting by Australian ballot
SU/SD Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed & voted by SU Board • Member districts assessed a pro-rated share which is included in voted district budgets (SU budget not voted as separate item by member district townspeople) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed by SD board • Typical SU services folded into regular SD budget & included as part of overall voted budget
Hiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member districts hire teachers and other staff, unless: * they are part of SU services, in which case some are hired by the SU board, and others by the SU superintendent, (e.g., under federal grants.) 	<p>All staff are hired by the SD board or the Superintendent.</p>

I have included this chart to show you major differences between supervisory unions and supervisory districts with respect to their governance structure. Both are governance models. **A CESA is not a governance model. It is a service agency.** That is its function. Supervisory unions and districts can all work together in a shared services entity, like our Vermont Learning Collaborative. A CESA is not another administrative tier. It does not set policy. It is a lean, service provider model. We have an executive director. Services are

provided as requested by member districts on a contract basis or through shared agreements.

Examples of Vermont Learning Collaborative Cost Savings

This cost analysis compared services provided by the Vermont Learning Collaborative to those of alternate providers used by our member Supervisory Unions and Districts. Data were provided by business office personnel regarding their expenses for comparative services. This analysis focuses on five current main areas of shared services: professional development, evaluation services, staffing services, consultation and programming. I shared this chart when I testified to you in January, but I did not go into detail at that time.

Products & Services Provided	Cost Savings and Benefits for Members
<p>Professional Development Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>De-escalation training</i> ● <i>Hazing/Harassment and Bullying Prevention and Intervention training</i> ● <i>Special Education laws and regulations</i> ● <i>Supporting students with mental health challenges</i> ● <i>Classroom based Tier One interventions for students with mental health needs</i> 	<p>Supervisory unions and districts saved an average of 66 percent on professional development costs by using their regional service agency compared to individually hosting these events.</p> <p>Professional development was hosted locally or virtually saving staff time and transportation costs.</p>
<p>Evaluation Service Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Comprehensive Autism Evaluations</i> ● <i>Psycho-educational evaluations</i> ● <i>Speech and Language Evaluations</i> 	<p>By using their regional educational service agency, member supervisory unions' and districts' savings ranged from 20 - 50 percent on evaluation services yielding an average savings of 38 percent.</p> <p>No waiting lists were necessary; therefore, all evaluations were provided within special education compliance timelines. Providers are regionally localized thereby reducing travel time and associated costs compared to other providers.</p>

<p>Staffing Services Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Speech and Language Services</i> • <i>Board Certified Behavior Analyst</i> 	<p>In person services provided to student(s) in out of district settings ensuring free and appropriate education access for students.</p> <p>The regional service agency is able to hire and fulfill multiple part time FTE positions shared regionally across Supervisory Unions/Districts ensuring service needs are met and cost savings are reduced by up to 50 percent or more per FTE.</p>
<p>Supervisory union/District Consultation Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Program Review</i> • <i>Program Restructuring</i> 	<p>Accessing their regional educational service agency for supervisory union/district consultation saved members up to 62 percent in consultation fees. Services focused on increasing supervisory unions and districts' capacity to provide in-house programming for complex learners, with the goal of reducing reliance on outside placement services.</p>
<p>Special Education Programming Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Elementary K - 6 Social Emotional Programming</i> 	<p>By partnering with their regional educational service agency, member supervisory union/districts are committing to local programming within their school settings thereby providing students access to a range of programming that includes the least restrictive setting. Currently, the southeastern area of Vermont has a severe lack of high quality therapeutic programming.</p> <p>The model of using the regional service agency allows for higher quality, closer to home programming for students, with a continuum of most to least restrictive settings to support students' growth and fulfilling the ultimate goal of returning to</p>

	<p>their home supervisory union/district. Anticipated average supervisory union/district savings for service fees and transportation are expected to be up to 85 percent of their current out of supervisory union/district expenses.</p>
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Areas of Savings within Windham Northeast Supervisory Union

Currently the greatest potential for significant cost savings at scale as well as enhanced services for our students within the WNESU is in the area of special education. Sending students out of district to get the services they need, and are required by law, is more expensive than serving them within our supervisory union. However, many of these students need special expertise. It is a dramatic cost savings for us, for example, to have the CESA hire the specialists we need; then we share the cost on a *pro rata* basis as needed, rather than bearing the cost of a full-time employee.

We are seeing immediate cost savings in the areas of professional development (PD) for both teachers and paraprofessionals. But there are other cost savings that have appeared recently. Here is a statement from WNESU Superintendent of Schools, Andy Haas:

“For WNESU, I think our biggest savings to date have been found with quality PD offered at a discounted rate. The collaborative has been able to line up targeted PD for the region (after surveying members) and then line up a series of workshops. These have been virtual, which further reduces the cost. Recently, we were able to have the majority of our administrators attend a PD on employment and discipline of employees, specific to VT and teachers, at a fraction of what our law firm would have charged us.

“Additionally, Jill is able to post positions for us on a National level. This gains us greater exposure for free.

“When I was looking at possible consultants for strategic planning, Jill was able to research and vet numerous consultants and bring them to me. We met and discussed each of them and their pros and cons. Each of them was a fraction of the \$70,000 quoted costs from The School Superintendents Association (AASA), which is the group many districts have used in the past, because they did not know there were others in the area who did the work.

“I learned the other week that the collaborative has evaluators who can provide contracted services much cheaper and with a reduced turnaround than our typical outside vendor, and I am told the evaluation is as good, if not better.”

Here is a summary of what the WNESU has spent in fees and for services this fiscal year: \$19,200 Membership Fee; and \$2,250 for Professional Development for employees in all of our member districts (Athens/Grafton, Rockingham, Westminster)

The Executive Director, Jill Graham, is a phone call or quick email away. She is highly responsive.

Here is a summary from Jill of the specific services she has provided to the WNESU to date:

- Participation in VTLC regional board meetings to provide input regarding the agency's direction and service priorities
- Participation of the supervisory union's larger leadership team in the VTLC needs assessments which helps to inform the agency's service priorities
- Access to regional professional development that has included: 504 training, Hazing/Harassment/Bullying training, Understanding and responding to behavior in the classroom, Legal series training, and trauma-informed classroom training
- Participation in the Special Education Directors forums which helps drive the agency's direction to support special education needs regionally
- Cooperative purchasing opportunities for para-professional professional development, MTSS/UDL systems change academy, and data platforms
- Assistance with posting and recruiting for hard-to-fill positions
- Resource for finding highly qualified consultants for strategic planning and leadership cabinet training
- Available for on-call consultation and brainstorming at any time.

In testimony to House Ed, committee members asked if there are other people with the expertise of Jill Graham available to serve in the executive director (ED) role in other parts of the state. We feel confident that there are, and those EDs will talk with each other. While each CESA region and member will have its own unique needs, there will be commonalities. They will share and learn from one another, with cost-savings and improved services throughout the state.

Here are a few closing thoughts. We need time to fully develop the cost savings made possible through CESAs, not only in our region where we are already underway, but throughout the state. I do believe that the shared services model serves us well. Both supervisory unions and the larger CESAs allow us to protect the strengths of our rural communities, while reducing costs, increasing efficiencies, and serving our students.

Thank you for considering the shared services model, which was well documented and recommended by the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force and then further recommended by the House Committee on Education in their Act 955.

I will leave you with this quote from the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force Final Report:

“The CESA model consolidates only those functions that cannot be delivered efficiently or consistently at the local level. Regionalizing these shared, high-cost and low-frequency services—such as multidisciplinary evaluations, itinerant specialists, professional development, and business operations—creates scale where it matters, without altering school governance or local decision-making over instruction, staffing, or budgeting. Local districts continue to operate schools, set priorities, and retain all responsibilities for student learning and community engagement. CESAs serve as shared infrastructure, not a new governing body: they provide regional capacity that districts draw on, at cost, with transparent pricing, annual audits, and surplus refunds. In practice, CESAs function as a wholesale provider of specialized and technical services, allowing districts to redirect time and resources toward students rather than duplicating complex operations in parallel, reducing the need to increase spending.”

Thank you.

