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Testimony, Senate Education Committee
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Thank you for this opportunity to testify today about House Bill 955. The Rural School Community Alliance appreciates the ongoing work of the Senate Education Committee, including on H.955, to chart a path forward that will increase opportunities for students while also respecting and supporting Vermont's rural schools and communities.

Specifically, we appreciate your support for

- Cooperative Education Service Areas (CESAs), to achieve cost savings and improved quality while minimizing disruption to students, through shared, contracted services
- Supervisory unions, particularly in rural areas
- Leadership and governance provided by SUs and SDs at the local level
- A district merger exploration process that embraces democratic community engagement and voluntary, local decisions on whether to form new unions
- Acknowledgment of differences in district operation resulting from rurality and an approach to merger study that takes such differences into account.

Included below are several additional considerations as you finalize your work on H.955, regarding CESAs, school district mergers, and class-size minimums.

CESA ESTABLISHMENT and SERVICES

The role of a CESA is to provide operational efficiency and improved quality through shared, contracted services on a greater scale than individual supervisory unions or districts can provide. In a CESA, such benefits can be achieved both more quickly and without the upheaval and disruption that inevitably comes with district consolidation. Meanwhile, superintendents can focus more closely on SU/SD leadership, governance, and programs that enhance academic excellence and expand opportunities for students.

RSCA supports:

- ★ A menu of services offered by each CESA that includes Special Education.
- ★ All CESA members contracting for Special Education services to meet student needs and supplement what is available locally.
- ★ All CESA members required to adopt (or explore adopting) at least two other provided services, within a specified time period.
- ★ Between 9 to 12 CESAs statewide, which would ensure that CESAs are large enough to support substantial savings while remaining nimble enough to be responsive to members.

Recommendations and additional information regarding CESAs

1. **Rather than mandate CESA members contract for a large number of services, allow SUs and SDs to start with a small number and gradually add new services as CESAs become more established.** For useful information and insight regarding effective growth of CESA services and member adoption, see the report, ***A Shared Municipal Efficiency Study***, https://dos.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2019/10/efficiency-study_final.pdf.
2. **Include a brief period after CESAs are set up where membership is subject to adjustment,** in a relatively informal and flexible process. Collaborations may already exist between SUs/SDs and different CESA groupings can build on such collaborations.

STRATEGIC DISTRICT MERGERS

The process outlined in H.955 for potential school district consolidation focuses on use of merger study committees, as provided in current law.

RSCA supports:

- ★ Using skilled and experienced facilitators to guide and support local decision-making.
- ★ Retaining the power of school boards to vote to form a study committee.
- ★ Staggering the implementation of CESAs and the formation of study committees.
- ★ A merger exploration and study process that respects and takes into account districts that operate in different grades.

Recommendations and additional information regarding district mergers

1. **Study Committee Facilitators should be qualified and experienced at supporting group decision-making.** Knowledge of the Vermont education landscape is less important than their facilitation skills. Sue McCormick, who facilitated the Act 73 redistricting task force, is a strong example of a person with the skill set needed to facilitate local merger conversations. Sue is not an educator; she is a trained facilitator focused on that role. Trained facilitators enable enhanced communication and collaboration within a group; they build trust between group members; and they are not tied to a pre-determined outcome— rather, they facilitate an outcome determined by the group. Please prioritize hiring facilitators who have formal training in facilitation skills.
2. **As per current law, retain the power of school boards to vote to form a study committee.** A facilitator's initial role should be to identify promising groupings of districts who can explore informally the likely benefits and challenges of consolidation. It should not be assumed that district merger will bring cost effectiveness and additional opportunities. After discussing their options for merger locally, school boards can then vote to establish a formal study committee, which should include an in-depth cost benefit analysis as part of its work. As noted above, RSCA supports the provision included in your Draft 1.1 that respects and takes into account

districts that operate in different grades: specifically, that does not require a district to be included as “necessary” to the formation of a union district if the district is in the minority with respect to operation.

3. **Stagger the formation of CESAs and merger conversations.** Given the priority to establish CESAs quickly, it is not feasible to ask districts to participate in formal merger study committees at the same time. Instead, following facilitated informal merger conversations, and in consultation with their regional facilitator, it is more reasonable for districts to decide by mid to late 2027 whether to form a study committee and designate “necessary” and “advisable” districts.
4. **In sparsely populated rural areas, an enrollment goal for new merged districts of at least 1,000 students may well be an unreachable number,** since the large geographic area needed to reach this number could be impractical. Lower-enrollment mergers may be feasible and should not be discouraged based on an arbitrary target size. Please indicate that flexibility below 1,000 is allowed in the creation of a merger study committee.
5. **Mergers between currently merged districts deserve special consideration.** This is especially true when the member towns of a union district have widely disparate size: in this case, much smaller towns can be outvoted easily by larger ones in a comingled vote. In agreeing to form a newly merged district, a process should be considered for the formerly independent districts to either include or reject articles of agreement they originally adopted by vote.

CLASS-SIZE MINIMUMS

In prior testimony, RSCA has noted our view that the class-size minimum threshold requirements in Act 73 are not supported by evidence leading to improved student outcomes. We also do not believe they are an effective approach to reducing costs.

RSCA supports:

★ Delaying implementation of class-size minimums until there is additional clarity with respect to several Act 73 provisions and contingencies– including the foundation formula, district mergers, and school construction.

Sample Timeline

CESAs, School District Mergers, Enlarged SUs or SDs: three complex changes with the ability to transform our education system require a staggered approach to implementation.

