

Michael Livingston

Senate Education Testimony

5.5.2026

## **Introduction**

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak with you today. For the record, my name is Michael Livingston and I am a retired educator with over 40 years of experience in K-12 education in five schools in the Upper Valley of Vermont. I have worked in both public and independent schools as a teacher and administrator. I am currently serving on the Sharon Elementary and the White River Valley Supervisory Union school boards. Besides my family, education is my life passion and I'm devoted to its success. I want to acknowledge the hard work you're undertaking to negotiate a very complex challenge.

## **Background**

I know you're all well aware of the potential impacts that some of the proposed changes might have on our system. I am well acquainted with the impact that far reaching legislative initiatives can impose on educational systems. I grew up in northern California. After completing my undergraduate degree, I enrolled in a teacher certification program. Midway through my second classroom placement I was offered a full-time teaching position for the following year.

Unfortunately, two months after I was offered that position California passed Prop. 13 known as the Jarvis-Gann tax initiative. At the time, California was widely considered to have perhaps the best public school system K - College in the country but after the passage of Prop 13 the state's school system was gutted. Teachers with anywhere from 3 to 5 years experience were summarily laid off across the state, and by all estimates that system has never recovered. In fact, that vote was the impetus that launched my career as I sought a job out of state because there were no positions to be had in California.

I mention this as a cautionary tale. I know you're well aware but we have to be very careful about far reaching legislative initiatives because they don't always achieve their intended goals and in-fact may precipitate many unintended ones instead.

After leaving California and prior to my time in Vermont I taught 5th grade in El Paso, Texas with 36 students. Let's be clear, that experience bore absolutely no resemblance to what I would consider an optimal student experience. I was the mayor of a small town, not an effective educational leader. Although some of our class sizes in Vermont are indeed small we need to ensure that we do not inadvertently create another Prop 13 situation. The 36 students I taught in El Paso were not pandemic era children and they had no experience with current technology and social media. Those same 36 children in today's world would pose a significantly greater set of challenges.

### **Two Inherent Themes**

When I talk about education with colleagues I note two recurring themes. The first is that **scale**, our small scale in Vermont, is our friend, not our enemy. A smaller scale provides greater opportunity for connection and **connection is the main ingredient necessary to build trust and respect**. All growth, whether with students, faculty and staff or schools begins with a trusting and respectful environment. Children often need a lot of encouragement to attempt the appropriate risk taking necessary to succeed. Without trust and respect educators have no authentic leverage and our opportunity for promoting authentic growth is severely limited.

Secondly, our path forward will be determined by our ability to attract and **keep highly effective leaders**. Leaders who know how to cultivate trust and respect and appropriately distribute leadership opportunities are the ones who will create and maintain positive learning environments for our children.

Occasionally, I get asked to imagine what I would do if I had a magic wand. I continually come back to one idea. I would create the Vermont Educational Leadership Academy, a collective of support staff, specialists, students, parents, faculty, and administration to examine our educational landscape and identify those people and programs that best exemplify educational success. We would then make those individuals available to communities across the state to help schools, districts and supervisory unions create specific goals they would hold themselves accountable to. Holding those exemplary individuals and programs to the light would not only allow us to identify and promote successful practices, it would encourage others to seek positions of leadership. Vermont must create opportunities to cultivate leadership from within.

Our national demographic insists on it. The people needed to run our schools aren't going to come from somewhere else.

The challenge with proposals like this is that they require time. Lasting and positive change requires a serious time commitment. I've witnessed the complete transformation of my supervisory union in the last six years. That transformation was guided by an exceptional school leader who helped shape and create a shared vision which we were all then held accountable to. As a result, attendance is up, test scores are up, morale is up and trust in our communities is up. I felt it and saw it when I walked into my local school to mentor a 6th grader just this morning. Our superintendent is not a unicorn. He's an exceptionally talented individual but this model can be replicated. What it cannot be is dictated.

The distinction between telling and asking is the difference between failure and success. All of this is to say there are no quick fixes or remedies. There's **attracting and maintaining qualified personnel who have the vision and the capacity to distribute leadership and involve their communities to help best prepare our children for their future. Our future. And it takes vision and commitment.**

### **Three Specific Areas of Interest**

#### **1. CESAs**

First and foremost, **I want to unequivocally support CESAs.** Our supervisory union is effectively a mini CESA, and we have seen substantial savings (minimally \$750,000) in the first year of implementing a program to keep some of our more challenged students in house by providing them appropriate educational opportunities without sending them out of district. **CESAs should be seen as service providers who would offer support when requested by supervisory unions and districts.** The question of scale is important. **CESAs need to be large enough to achieve the benefit of scale, but not so large as to lose their flexibility. They should be formed locally through conversations among schools and towns and not be an instrument for consolidation.** Currently seven CESAs are being proposed. I would suggest we consider a number approaching twice that.

I would respectfully offer that version 1.1 of your bill asks for too much, too soon. We need to examine CESAs first and while those entities are being formed, allow SU's and SD's to engage in informal merger conversations. **Study committees for merging should be voluntary and not be mandated by hired facilitators.**

I have seen firsthand how communities can come together to make challenging decisions. The towns of Chelsea and Tunbridge form the First Branch Unified School District. When I was the principal at Tunbridge each town maintained their own programming, K-6 in Tunbridge and K-8 in Chelsea. A joint study committee between the two towns involving educators, parents, community members and educational experts deemed class sizes too small and recommended we send all K-4 students to Tunbridge and all 5-8 graders to Chelsea. That shift has resulted in a number of very positive changes for First Branch and it was achieved without being forced. In fact, I would say it succeeded only because it wasn't forced. And mind you, this happened on the heels of Chelsea having lost its high school, an event that still ripples through that community.

I would also respectfully submit that asking schools to spend 18 months in a study committee when there are so many other urgent priorities is frankly a poor use of precious time.

Additionally, there is little to no evidence that mergers will improve educational quality or save money. There is so much else that needs to be addressed. We can't afford to divert that time and energy.

## **2. Class Size**

My second point has to do with minimum class sizes. I think it's imperative that we delay minimum class size requirements until the contingencies in the foundation formula have been worked out. There are too many simultaneous requirements being asked of schools on top of all that they're trying to do relative to student engagement, special Ed, student achievement, student mental health and attendance (to name just a few).

## **3. School Fees**

In version 1.1, section 24 and 24A address what are being referred to as fees. What are being labeled as fees are a fact of life in many schools. They exist for certain events or activities like school trips, summer school and after school programs. If memory serves me correctly we have had students paying fees for admission to playoff sporting events in Vermont for years.

In my experience, in both public and independent schools, fees are applied with an eye to equity. Ironically, those who would eliminate fees would ultimately be eliminating opportunity.

Years ago I took a group of almost 30 students to Costa Rica for homestays with local families, foreign language immersion, and service work. Those families who could afford to pay did so. Those who could afford to pay only part, paid their part. Those students who couldn't afford to pay were offered the opportunity to go by virtue of fundraising to support those in need.

Vermonters are both fair and responsible. We have no interest in creating haves and have nots.

Finally, I'd like to respond to the Secretary of Education who implied in her testimony last week that Supervisory Unions exist solely to protect choice. SU's are about so much more than choice. They are about local democratic voice, which we should be doing everything in our power to protect. They operate like mini CESA's allowing my elementary school of 155 students to thrive. That relationship allows for both efficiency and accountability, both of which swerve to make us better.

Thank you for listening.