

Submitted to: VT Senate Committee on Education

From: Patrick J. Reen, Vermont Superintendents Association Trustee and Superintendent for the Mount Abraham Unified School District

Subject: Testimony on H.955

May 5, 2026

Thank you for inviting VSA to offer testimony today as you work to move H.955 forward and thank you for your courage to engage in this transformative work. I am here today speaking as a Trustee for VSA, not in my role as superintendent for MAUSD, though I will reference experiences from my district and my region for context.

The Vermont Superintendents Association did not take a formal position on H.955 as passed by the House but has consistently emphasized the following principles:

- VSA supports efforts to advance greater equity, quality, and sustainability in Vermont's education system.
- Scale matters at all levels of the delivery system.
- Supervisory district minimum sizes of 2,000 students should be the goal where geographically feasible, accounting for projected enrollment declines.
- Superintendents have engaged in the hard work and had the difficult conversations, as required by Act 73, about class size minimums as a state-led approach to addressing scale. Repealing or delaying this provision would feel a bit like the rug being pulled out from under us. Any nuances that need to be worked out should be worked out in rulemaking, not by repealing or delaying the provision.
- The current funding system is inequitable; a well-designed foundation formula would move us in a promising direction, provided the General Assembly makes important decisions about the missing pieces and includes safeguards against economic volatility and shifting political priorities.
- School size matters, but geographic realities and construction constraints must be acknowledged.
- School construction aid is one of the most effective tools to support scale and system improvement.

H.955 works to move toward these principles in some meaningful ways. While it does not fully reflect what we originally recommended and proposed starting in January 2025, superintendents more than anyone recognize that deep change requires political will, broad buy-in, and community engagement. That said, we would be remiss not to point out that even what is already required in H.955 will take considerable resources and staff time to work through, particularly the district merger studies and, to a lesser extent, standing up CESAs. This is especially important to note as this body considers adding more requirements to schools.

CESAs are not a panacea, but they are an evidence-based approach to sharing services and resources. Many states use them effectively. However, they are not governance structures and will not solve all systemic challenges. We share concerns that, if not implemented thoughtfully, CESAs could add another bureaucratic layer, especially given our already complex governance system. We are concerned about mandating specific services; services should instead be regionally determined based on need. We recognize leaving utilization of services offered by a CESA totally up to choice could risk the effectiveness of CESAs and their sustainability. We ask that you consider other guardrails to address this while allowing regions the flexibility to access services that match the needs of the region.

The required merger studies are a constructive step toward advancing conversations about governance reform. However, these efforts are highly time-intensive and will require substantial support from the Agency of Education and external consultants. When my district, MAUSD and our neighbors to the west, Addison Northwest, engaged in a merger study a few years ago a group of seventeen people from the two communities met monthly for eighteen months before agreeing we should pursue a merger of our districts, which was ultimately rejected by voters. Given the scale of this work, we urge the Legislature to take the findings of these merger studies seriously in future sessions. Vermont's governance model must evolve, though we recognize that change must occur at a pace that reflects legislative consensus and public input. Therein lies the challenge with forced mergers. Despite many months of really hard work it seems the legislature and Vermont's citizens are no closer to consensus on change we are willing to accept to create scale than when this biennium began. Without a strong consensus,

at least in the legislature, the push back that will certainly follow forced mergers could result in walking back some of the requirements which might put us in a worse position in the end. Not unlike what we saw play out with Act 46 or even the class size topic I mentioned earlier. As much as we might wish forced mergers would result in creating the scale we know is needed, history would suggest otherwise. We recommend offering construction aid and other such incentives to encourage district consolidation where it makes sense.

As we consider the issue of creating scale to improve efficiency I am compelled to once again emphasize the importance of creating larger supervisory districts, not supervisory unions. Without restating all the details, supervisory districts are much more cost efficient, much more effective at creating equity and as such better able to direct time and money to support high quality teaching and learning. We see these three things as the essence of what Act 73 is designed to achieve. We encourage the Legislature to use the off-session to find solutions related to tuitioning, independent schools, and local voice within a supervisory district model rather than further expanding supervisory unions.

One of the most impactful tools in Act 73 to improve equity around the state that also offers a strong cost stabilization mechanism is the foundation formula. We recognize that the current funding system is inequitable and it will take all of us to build a thoughtful alternative that does not erode student opportunity or require large and immediate tax hikes for certain communities. The foundation formula, as currently drafted, requires significant additional work. Many key questions remain unresolved, and safeguards must be established to ensure that “adequate” funding levels are not eroded during economic downturns or shifts in political priorities. We look forward to continued collaboration with the General Assembly to address these gaps.

Lastly, in response to the Senate Education Committee’s [proposed amendments](#):

- VSA disagrees with the fifth instance of amendment, which lowers the district size target from 2,000 to 1,000 students. The original language already allows flexibility for geographic considerations (“as practical”), and the target should remain higher.

- We strongly disagree with the sixth and seventh instances of amendment in Draft 1.2, which would remove the focus on contiguous school districts. Central office leadership plays a critical role in supporting schools, particularly during crises. There is no replacement for being physically present in school communities to provide this support. Noncontiguous districts undermine this function and risk further straining school leadership. As noted in testimony from the Vermont Principals' Association, such policies risk turning principals into "principalintendents." In addition, limiting the ability of communities with differing operating structures to explore merging into more efficient governance and operations structures dilutes the potential for meaningful governance reform. The Legislature should encourage innovative thinking that respects historical patterns while advancing more effective and efficient governance models.
- We strongly disagree with striking Sec. 24 of H.955. This raises significant equity concerns. Publicly funded students should have access to the full range of educational opportunities, regardless of their ability to pay, across both public and independent schools.
- Regarding intradistrict budgeting rules, as noted in prior testimony to House Ways and Means, we have deep reservations about being overly prescriptive. While the foundation formula determines funding levels, prescribing how districts must allocate those funds is overly restrictive. Districts are already implementing equitable budgeting practices tailored to local needs. If legislative action is necessary, it should provide guidance rather than impose rigid requirements.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Patrick J. Reen