



LAMOILLE SOUTH SUPERVISORY UNION
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Good afternoon, members of the Senate Education Committee,

For the record, my name is Ryan Heraty, and I am the superintendent of the Lamoille South Supervisory Union, representing the towns of Elmore, Morristown, and Stowe. I also serve as the trustee for the Winooski Valley Region. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your work on behalf of Vermont's children and communities.

I want to start where I think we all agree: Vermont's property tax burden is unsustainable, and the cost of education must be addressed. Superintendents are not here to defend the status quo. We are here because we believe the decisions this committee makes in the coming weeks will have consequences — for students, for communities, and for taxpayers — that will last decades. Getting this right matters more than getting it done quickly.

What the Evidence Tells Us About Consolidation

This past summer and fall, a bipartisan redistricting task force completed a rigorous, statewide review of enrollment data, financial data, and consolidation research from across the country. They solicited input from more than 5,000 Vermonters. Their conclusion was clear: forced consolidation is unlikely to lower costs, improve educational outcomes, or expand equity in Vermont. That finding is not an outlier. The research literature on rural school consolidation is consistent — savings are frequently overstated, transition costs are undercounted, and the communities most affected are often those least able to absorb disruption. We should take that evidence seriously.

I want to be direct about something, because I think it is important for this conversation: school budgets are approximately 80% salaries and benefits. The only way to generate meaningful savings in education is to have fewer schools and fewer adults working in those schools. Superintendents understand that. We are not here to protect buildings or positions. We are here to argue that those hard decisions — about which schools, which positions, which communities — must be made with accurate data, community voice, and a realistic implementation plan. Making reductions to staffing must be done in a thoughtful manner that leverages attrition. Closing schools must be done in way that is caring and incentivized through school construction funding.

Forced consolidation through financial pressure defers those decisions to new, larger school boards distanced from the communities they serve, without any guarantee of the outcomes taxpayers are expecting.

Bill H.955 reflects important lessons from the redistricting task force. It recognizes that consolidation, to succeed, must be designed collaboratively. We support that principle, and we want to help make it work.

Where We Stand on CESAs

Superintendents are genuinely supportive of Cooperative Educational Service Agencies. CESAs represent a proven, flexible model for regional cost-sharing — special education services, transportation, professional development, curriculum coordination — that does not require dismantling community governance structures to achieve savings.

My colleague Superintendent Sousa has spoken to you extensively about the CESA model, and I will not repeat that work here. What I will add is a note of caution about implementation. The CESA boundaries drawn in H.955 raise real questions for the Winooski Valley Region. The proposed service areas appear too geographically large to generate meaningful cost savings or functional collaboration. Larger is not always more efficient. We would ask the committee to build in a process for regions to provide structured feedback on proposed boundaries before they are finalized, with clear criteria for what makes a CESA viable and cost-effective.

We also want to be clear about what CESAs are and what they are not. They are a regional service-sharing mechanism. They are not a path to district consolidation, and conflating the two risks undermining public trust in both. If this committee wants CESAs to succeed — and we believe they can — the distinction needs to be explicit in the legislation and in how it is communicated to communities.

The Data Problem

There is a foundational issue that sits beneath every other question in this debate: Vermont does not currently have the data infrastructure needed to make these decisions well. Today, it is difficult for a school board member, a parent, or a legislator to obtain basic, comparable data about their local schools. Measures such as per-pupil spending, academic proficiency rates, staffing ratios, average educator compensation, and school climate should all be easily accessible. That is not acceptable when we are asking communities to make decisions about consolidation, and it is not acceptable when we are trying to evaluate whether taxpayer dollars are being used wisely.

The study committees established in H.955 will be limited in their effectiveness until this problem is addressed. We cannot ask communities to make informed decisions without giving them the information they need to do so. Superintendents have consistently supported data transparency and accountability systems. We are asking this committee to treat the investment in data infrastructure as a prerequisite to the larger reform effort, not an afterthought.

The Agency of Education's current capacity to support large-scale implementation is also a real constraint. The task force identified this explicitly. Any timeline for change needs to account for what the Agency can realistically support without setting up communities — and the reform effort itself — for failure.

On the Foundation Formula

Vermont already has elements of a foundation formula in its current structure. The tax rate floor of \$1.00 creates a baseline and the excess spending threshold — which penalizes districts that exceed 118% of the state

per-pupil average — creates a ceiling. The large range in spending creates significant and sometimes counterproductive disparities across the state that could be addressed by adjusting these two variables.

We are not opposed to education finance reforms, including a foundation formula or adjustments to the tax rate floor or excess spending threshold. But we urge the committee to proceed carefully and to require transparent, publicly available modeling before any changes take effect. Vermont has been through education finance reform before. The underfunding that preceded changes in the 1990s and the unintended consequences of Act 127 are recent enough that the lessons should still be fresh. Careful modeling, transition mechanisms, and honest accounting for the two-decade pause in state school construction funding are essential to getting this right.

Summary

As the committee considers Bill H.955, we are asking to please consider these three things:

First, invest in the data infrastructure necessary for communities and study committees to make evidence-based decisions. This is not optional — it is the foundation for everything else.

Second, move forward with CESAs as a genuine regional cost-sharing mechanism, with realistic boundary-setting criteria and a structured process for regional input before boundaries are finalized.

Third, preserve community voice and democratic process in any consolidation decisions, and resist mechanisms — including foundation formula structures — that are designed to force consolidation outcomes through financial pressure rather than community consent.

Vermont communities are willing to make hard decisions. Superintendents are willing to lead those conversations. What we need is a framework built on accurate information, realistic implementation capacity, and genuine respect for the communities that will live with the results.

As my Board Chair said in a recent meeting, “A good plan will sell itself.”

Thank you for your time and for the work you are doing on behalf of Vermont's students and families.

Ryan Heraty
Superintendent