
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Vermont Agency of Education

Subject: H.955, An act relating to next steps in transforming Vermont's education system

Date: May 1, 2026

The Agency of Education recognizes the complexity of leading through a period of significant transition in Vermont's education system and the weight of the decisions before the Legislature. This moment requires clear direction, coherence, and a sustained focus on the long-term outcomes we are collectively working to achieve for students.

As passed by the House, [H.955](#) does not provide that clarity or direction. The resulting legislation does not deliver on the promise of Act 73, and the Agency has serious concerns about its impact on students, districts, and taxpayers. The Agency's concerns are magnified by the House and Senate each passing an FY27 Budget (H.951) which endorses policy decisions in H.955 by withholding previously appropriated funds from the Agency to finance this approach. The Agency has communicated [concerns with the FY27 Budget in writing](#), and we request a separate opportunity to address these concerns in testimony.

At its core, H.955 is built on a fundamental misalignment with Act 73. The bill advances a lengthy and complex voluntary merger process that is unlikely to produce the scale necessary to support the foundation formula. Failure to achieve the scale envisioned in Act 73 will result in lower expectations for education quality or higher costs for districts. As members of the committees themselves have acknowledged, without meaningful consolidation, districts will struggle to operate effectively under that formula. In practice, this approach risks producing reactive, uneven mergers driven by financial pressure rather than a coherent, statewide strategy. The Agency shares the concern that this path will not achieve the outcomes envisioned in Act 73 and does not believe it is a sound foundation for statewide transformation.

In place of a clear and deliberate approach to governance reform, H.955 relies heavily on the creation of Cooperative Educational Service Areas (CESAs) as a mechanism for achieving efficiencies. While the Agency supports regional service



delivery, the bill proposes doing so by adding a new layer of governance, with associated administrative costs and structural complexity. There is little credible evidence that this approach will yield the efficiencies that have been suggested and risks exacerbating the very workforce issues and complexity that are current barriers to education quality and affordability. Claims of substantial savings are based on misapplied or overstated data and should not be the basis for decisions of this magnitude. Creating additional bureaucracy without addressing underlying governance fragmentation will not deliver the system-level improvements that Vermonters expect and abdicates state level responsibilities to ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education.

More broadly, H.955 layers a series of policy decisions on top of this weak foundation that compound, rather than resolve, the underlying challenges. The bill delays implementation of the foundation formula, introduces new processes that duplicate or conflict with work already completed at the state level, and shifts responsibility for resolving complex structural issues onto local communities. It also proposes significant new investments in school construction without a clear, statewide understanding of system needs and in ways that are misaligned with the timeline and resource requirements the Agency has outlined for successful implementation. This approach risks a failed rollout of a major public investment, with long-term implications for the viability and credibility of state support for school construction. In doing so, it increases uncertainty, adds cost, and risks further entrenching inequities that Act 73 was designed to address. Taken together, these choices do not reflect a thoughtful or strategic use of limited state resources.

The Agency has consistently provided analysis, data, and pragmatic solutions to the challenges identified throughout this process, including approaches to governance, staffing, finance, and implementation. We remain ready to partner with the Legislature to advance a path forward that reflects both the intent and the urgency of Act 73.

Achieving the scale and coherence envisioned in Act 73 is not easy—but it is necessary. The complexity of this work should not be a reason to defer or diffuse responsibility. As passed by the House, H.955 shifts the most difficult decisions away from the state level and places the burden on local communities to solve systemic challenges that require statewide leadership.

To deliver on the promise of Act 73—equitable access, improved outcomes, and a more sustainable system—the State must take a clear, consistent, and evidence-based approach to governance and implementation. The Agency urges the Senate to reconsider the current direction of H.955 and to work collaboratively



toward a solution that is grounded in both the policy goals and the practical realities of Vermont's education system.

To chart a path forward toward, the Agency has identified five elements of education transformation that are essential to delivering on the promise of Act 73. While the first element—a new Supervisory District map—is directly informed by requirements in Act 73, the other elements are policy choices informed by concerns raised by educators, lawmakers, and the general public since passage of Act 73:

1. New Supervisory District Map
2. Choice and Attendance Zone Policies
3. 12 Month Limited Case-by-case Re-Evaluation
4. School Advisory Committees
5. Equity Based Budgeting Policy

In crafting legislation that will effect generational change in Vermont's education system, it is critical that the Legislature develop policies that are responsive to statewide needs and priorities. Vermonters demand state leadership to boost educational outcomes and bend the cost curve of funding education. Vermonters also demand opportunities for community engagement and recognition of traditional attendance patterns. While these priorities are sometimes treated as zero sum or mutually exclusive, the Agency is committed to making education transformation work for every Vermonter.

The five elements of education transformation are an expression of this commitment, and they are a roadmap to achieving it. The following testimony expands on each concept and provides draft statutory language. We appreciate your consideration and the opportunity to support your efforts to build the best education system in America.



1. New Supervisory District Map

Act 73 included specific parameters for new larger districts in Section 3(c), requiring districts to be “grand list and pupil-count balanced, demographically equitable, logistically feasible,” and to have “average daily membership of not fewer than approximately 4,000 and not more than 8,000 prekindergarten through grade 12 students.” These are not arbitrary targets; they were informed by research dating back to the 2024 [Picus Odden & Associates study](#) commissioned by the legislature, which modeled a foundation formula to provide robust opportunities within high-performance schools—assuming changes in governance to guarantee a minimum level of scale. The foundation formula in Act 73 assumes a minimum level of scale and failing to achieve that scale necessitates one of two compromises: Either there will be lower expectations and fewer opportunities for students in smaller districts, or the foundation formula will need to be increased to maintain smaller districts at taxpayers’ expense. Vermonters have not asked for lower expectations, and they have not asked for a more expensive system. Neither compromise is a tenable solution.

The Agency is providing two conceptual redistricting maps that meet the criteria of Act 73 and build on the work of the House Education Committee and the Redistricting Task Force. Last fall, the Task Force requested the Agency to develop a redistricting map rooted in the concept of regional high schools across Vermont. The latest iteration of that map, which has been adapted over time to reflect the needs of local communities, is reflected in [Hybrid V2](#). The Agency has similarly adapted a map that was under consideration in the House Education Committee to reflect local needs as well as the criteria in Act 73. That map is reflected in [House V4](#).

The Agency envisions both maps as Supervisory Districts. As many educators and lawmakers have acknowledged, the Supervisory Union structure limits the intended efficiencies of new, larger districts under Act 73, and the Agency is not supportive of maintaining this structure. The Agency recognizes that the perceived complexity of merging operating districts with non-operating districts has contributed to a preference by some lawmakers to maintain the Supervisory Union structure; however, traditional attendance patterns can be maintained through thoughtful policy in a Supervisory District structure, and the Agency has provided aligned recommendations for Choice and Attendance Zone policies.

- [House V4](#) – Map with 19 districts
- [Hybrid V2](#) – Map with 13 districts



2. Choice and Attendance Zone Policies

In order to achieve scale with new, larger districts with a Supervisory District structure, the Agency recommends managing choice through policy. The policy must enable students in communities that rely on approved independent schools or a variety of public schools to continue attending those schools. The policy must also require independent schools serving publicly funded students to operate in partnership with new, larger school districts within a shared accountability framework.

A bipartisan approach to managing school choice can be achieved by:

1. Enacting districts that reflect historic attendance patterns, while
2. requiring all districts to establish attendance zones and an intra-district choice policy tailored to reflect the needs of local communities.

The Agency recommends the following statutory changes:

-Add a new section, 16 V.S.A. § 564 (Enrollment and Attendance Zone Policy)

§ 564. ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE ZONE POLICY

(a) Definitions. As used in this section:

(1) "Attendance zone" means the geographic boundaries within the district that matches a student's residence to a school or schools for the student's grade band.

(2) "Public school" shall have the same meaning as subdivision 11(7) of this title.

(3) "Approved independent school" means an approved independent school that is eligible to receive public tuition pursuant to section 828 of this title.

(b) Policy. Each school board shall develop, adopt, and ensure the implementation of, and make available in the manner described under subdivision (563(1) of this chapter, a school enrollment and attendance zone policy according to the provisions of this section, to ensure each resident student is provided a free, appropriate public education that is substantially equal in quality and opportunity by determining a default school for each student to attend.

(1) The policy shall align to attendance patterns as they exist on July 1, 2026, including established patterns of attendance at approved independent schools within the school district's geographic boundaries and established patterns of attendance at public schools located in other states.

(2) Resident students who reside in a member town of a school district that did not operate a school for some or all grades on July 1, 2026, shall



not be assigned to a default public school operated by the district. The policy shall provide a process for such students to apply to any school operated by the school district or an approved independent school located within the boundaries of the school district.

(3) The policy shall limit student enrollment in any approved independent school consistent with the maximum number of publicly funded students for each approved independent school established by the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education shall determine the maximum number based on the enrolled number of publicly funded students as of July 1, 2026. The State Board may apply a reasonable inflator to the maximum number to reflect any anticipated fluctuations in student population. The State Board shall review an approved independent school's maximum number of publicly funded students upon such school's regular renewal of approval cycle.

(A) An approved independent school may apply to the State Board of Education for an adjustment to its maximum number of publicly funded students at any time to reflect extenuating circumstances including but not limited to the closure of a school for the same grade or grades within the school district.

(34) The enrollment and attendance zone policy shall be reviewed and updated every five years.

-Add a new section 16 V.S.A. § 565 (School Choice Policy)

§ 565. SCHOOL CHOICE POLICY

(a) Definitions. As used in this section:

(1) "Magnet school" means a specialized program that meets baseline quality requirements and also provides in-depth learning in a subject area or emphasizes certain skills or experiences such as STEAM and arts education. A magnet school may be established by a school district designating a public school operated by the district as a magnet school.

(2) "Hardship" means a set of extenuating circumstances, evidenced by a request made by a parent or guardian to accommodate a student's need to attend a school outside the student's assigned attendance zone under the policy developed pursuant to section 564 of this chapter.

(3) "Intradistrict choice" means policies that permit a family or student to choose to enroll in a public school operated by the school district when a school district operates more than one school per grade band.



(4) “Public high school choice” means the statutory program created pursuant to section 822a of this title that allows students attending grades nine through 12 in a public high school to apply for enrollment in a public high school located outside the student’s district of residence.

(b) Policy. Each school board shall develop, adopt, and ensure the implementation of, and make available in the manner described under subdivision (563(1) of this chapter, a school choice policy to manage student interest in exercising each type of school choice, including attendance at magnet schools, intradistrict choice, public high school choice, and choice needed due to hardship. The policy shall address the need for a lottery or admissions criteria, depending on the different choice option exercised. The policy shall be reviewed and updated as applicable every five years.

3. 12 Month Limited Case-by-case Re-Evaluation

The Agency is confident in legislators’ abilities to reflect the intricacies of local communities in crafting a statewide map. While state lawmakers are best positioned to provide leadership on redistricting, the Agency recommends granting the State Board the authority to grant case-by-case waivers to reassign school districts. A 12-month review process by the State Board of Education will provide an opportunity for school districts to provide feedback and ensure that redistricting assignments reflect the needs of local communities.

The Agency recommends the following statutory changes:

-Session law to provide a step in the transition process to new districts that allows for practical adjustments on request to adjust new district boundaries.

The State Board of Education shall create a process to evaluate requests from any school district to be assigned to an alternate new unified school district than the district to which it is assigned in this Act. The State Board may grant case-by-case waivers to reassign such a school district to a unified school district created by this Act upon finding that doing so would promote equitable budgeting and district policies and would support central offices that provide specialized resources and support for students and teachers in alignment with best practices for teaching and learning. A school district may submit a request for reassignment to the State Board after June 1, 2027. The State Board shall conclude its evaluation and issue its decision on all submitted requests no later than September 1, 2027.

4. School Advisory Committees



Under larger districts, local school boards will represent additional constituents and a broader array of communities. Larger districts will streamline governance, but there are implications for the number of Vermonters serving on school boards in this future state. Although we heard concerns about a loss of local voice, school board participation is not the only way to engage local communities. The Agency encourages lawmakers to consider additional avenues for parent and community engagement, including School Advisory Committees. Envisioned in the Governor's original Education Transformation Proposal, School Advisory Committees can guarantee meaningful community input by providing opportunities for participation in district-wide policymaking and budgeting, including Equity Based Budgeting. They are also a key strategy to addressing a recent finding from the U.S. Department of Education on limited family involvement in Vermont schools.

The Agency recommends the following statutory changes:

-Add new section at 16 V.S.A. § 564 (School Advisory Committees)

§ 564. SCHOOL ADVISORY COMMITTEES

(a) Each school district shall establish a local school advisory committee for each school. These committees shall have membership from parents, community members and students to represent the gender, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of the school community, and shall serve in an advisory role to the school administration.

(b) Building level principals will administer the application and membership process for the school advisory committees. School advisory committees shall provide input to the school board on equitable budgeting parameters and feedback on the proposed school district budget each year.

(c) A school advisory committee shall, through the administration of the building level principal, direct a designated portion of the funding allocated to the school it represents. Annually, the school board shall determine the amount that each school advisory committee will have authority to direct, which shall be equitable with respect to school size or school budget size. Before funds are expended, the school board shall approve the proposed plan developed by the school advisory committee.

5. Equity Based Budgeting Policy

Act 73 envisions and enacts a more equitable system of education funding in Vermont, starting with the foundation formula. While the foundation formula ensures inter-district equity, *intra*-district equity can be ensured through the development of Equity Based



Budgeting Policies at the district level while providing an additional avenue for local engagement and decision-making.

The Agency recommends the following statutory changes:

-Add new duty to 16 V.S.A. § 563 (Duties of School Boards)

[The school board shall] adopt and ensure the implementation of an equity-based budgeting policy, shall ensure that all schools within the district are allocated appropriate and equitable funding.

-Add new duty to 16 V.S.A. § 164 (Duties of the State Board of Education)

[The SBE shall] not less than every four years, review each school district's equity-based budgeting policy adopted pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 563 and provide a report to the Agency of Education, the House Committee on Education and the Senate Committee on Education on the strengths and weaknesses of those policies on a statewide basis.

