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Vermont Superintendents Association

Testimony to VT House Education Committee, VT Senate Education Committee

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Testimony on Priorities for 2026 Legislative Session and Work of the Redistricting Task Force

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Thank you for inviting VSA to offer testimony today in the early stages of this potentially historic session and thank you for your courage to engage in this truly transformative work. I am here today speaking as a Trustee for VSA, not in my role as superintendent for MAUSD, even though I will share some examples from my district and my region for context. While the perspectives I am sharing reflect the vast majority of VSAs membership, superintendents are not unanimous on all of these points.

The VSA shares your goals for Act 73 to create a more affordable and equitable education system that increases opportunities for Vermont students. As you continue the work of transforming education in Vermont we want you to know we stand ready as a willing and able partner. The Vermont Superintendents Association represents the leaders who manage Vermont's public school systems. Our members oversee instruction, staffing, budgets, transportation, special education, school safety, and community partnerships across every region of the state.

Our mission is to ensure every child in Vermont has access to a high-quality education that prepares them for life, work, and citizenship. Our vision is a system that is equitable, coherent, financially responsible, and grounded in community trust.

We are eager to lend our skills and knowledge to you to help make this transformation as successful and smooth as possible for Vermont students, educators and taxpayers.

We fully recognize the controversy of the work you are engaged in and the reality that many may agree this work needs to happen, even if they don't want change to happen in the communities they serve. Despite the controversy, we stand with you in this difficult work because we too are driven to do what is best for our students, our teachers and our taxpayers and we know we can't get where we need to be by remaining where we are.

While there is much work to be done, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are currently great things happening for students in Vermont. Across Vermont, schools are doing important and innovative work—progress that becomes especially clear when we look beyond the narrow lens of standardized test scores, which we know do not fully capture the critical skills, dispositions, and real-world competencies students need to be truly future-ready. We have communities that have largely been supportive of their schools, even when we have had to make some pretty big asks of them. We have amazing educators who care deeply about our students and families who work tirelessly to give the best they can.

We owe it to our students, families and educators to work together to ensure our teachers have the tools and support they need to provide our students the kinds of opportunities they deserve at a cost taxpayers can afford so that we can keep families in Vermont and maybe even attract more to our great state.

As I have said in prior testimony, we can: 1. provide a great education for our students, 2. have reasonable tax rates for our taxpayers or 3. have many small districts and many small schools. Pick two. I believe Act 73 chooses the right two, a great education and reasonable tax rates. VSA is here to help ensure Act 73 does this to the best of its abilities.

As the Legislature considers significant policy decisions, we urge you to keep five questions in mind:

1. Will this improve educational opportunity and student outcomes?
2. Is the approach grounded in credible research and Vermont context?
3. Does it reduce inequities rather than shift them?
4. Are timelines realistic and sequenced carefully?
5. Does the process strengthen trust rather than weaken it?

When these answers are unclear, refinement is better than speed.

Priorities for this Legislative Session

I. Create Scale at the District and School Level

Without creating scale in an equitable manner across the state at the district, and especially school levels we will not move the needle on affordability and equity. We are unlikely to increase scale in a meaningful way without upfront investments.

District Level - The VSA agrees we need fewer school districts in Vermont. We feel strongly these must be school districts and not supervisory unions. We believe fewer school districts can improve equity for our students and may eventually reduce some expenses if the size of the new districts are supported by research and make good common sense for Vermont. VSA has previously provided testimony suggesting district sizes of approximately 2,000-4,000 students based on review of research and experiences of VSA's superintendents. To be very clear:

1. These should all be school districts (SDs) with no supervisory unions (SUs). SDs:
 - a. Provide greater flexibility to move staffing and other resources where they are most needed
 - b. Provide greater job security to staff
 - c. Reduce redundancies in central offices and/or Cooperative Education Service Areas
 - d. Provide greater opportunity for public school choice and/or transfers
 - e. Provide a unified experience for students and staff which improves equity.
 - f. Offer a unified mission, vision, curriculum, teaching contract, strategic plan, budget, etc.
 - g. Allow district leaders to be more focused on the instructional needs of the district and less on the management of multiple districts.
 - h. In short **SDs will save more money and be more equitable than SUs**
 - i. VSA recognizes the role the four historic academies play in educating Vermont students and supports finding a method outside of creating SUs to continue this relationship
2. This will cost more money initially with potential for savings in the future
 - a. Standing up new districts while current districts remain operational will increase cost
 - b. Scaling up salaries and benefits in newly formed districts will increase cost
 - c. Paying attorneys to transfer property will increase cost
 - d. Paying attorneys to draft and/or review articles of agreement will increase cost
 - e. Paying attorneys to negotiate new collective bargaining agreements will increase cost
3. New districts should be created in ways that make sense for the region and for Vermont
 - a. 4,000 students makes sense in some regions, 2,000 students makes sense in others
 - b. The Redistricting Task Force did a good job articulating factors that need to be considered
4. Getting new districts operational will take time, money and support
 - a. Among other things, once new districts have been identified they will need to:
 - i. Elect a school board
 - ii. Hire a superintendent
 - iii. Hire central office staff
 - iv. Create a new name
 - v. Establish a new entity as a business

- vi. Transfer property
- vii. Transfer debt
- viii. Negotiate collective bargaining agreements
- ix. Adopt policies
- x. Establish a curriculum
- xi. Create an Assessment plan
- xii. Build a budget
- xiii. Assign staff
- xiv. Begin operations
- b. I was superintendent for ANESU when it became MAUSD. We kept the same five towns and six schools. We effectively changed our name and reduced our number of boards from seven to one. It took us eighteen months and cost tens of thousands of dollars to start up the new SD while running the old SU. The scale of change contemplated in Act 73 is much greater and the timeline and cost for the transition should reflect this.

School Level - Put plainly, Vermont can't afford to continue to operate the number of schools we have for the number of students we serve. As discussed, there are efficiencies that we could and should realize through district consolidation. Those efficiencies pale in comparison to the efficiencies that can be realized at the school level. As mentioned before in our pick two of three scenario, when we choose to have many small schools operating at a fraction of their capacity we are choosing to either allow taxes to increase at a faster rate or provide a reduced quality of education to our students. We know taxes can't keep growing the way they are now so the default action will continue to be to reduce the quality of education for students. That said, school consolidation must be undertaken thoughtfully, with clear plans that ensure improved opportunity and equity. Abrupt closures without such planning would betray Vermont's values. Scale is necessary at the school level because:

1. Operating many small schools results in inefficient staffing. This means we employ more staff than we need and can afford.
2. Inefficient staffing also means asking staff to do more with less when in reality we can really only do less with less without changing the way we deliver education
3. Coupled with the implementation of the foundation formula, more overhead expenses for facilities and inefficient staffing means fewer dollars go directly to students.
4. At the same time, as long as new mandates and social responsibilities continue to be placed upon schools, staffing needs will remain high. Every reduction in funding to our mental health partners and every new piece of legislation that requires someone to report out on or be trained in something adds personnel costs to schools and districts that are not directly related to teaching and learning.

II. Ensure a Truly Equitable Foundation Formula

Without seriously addressing our scale issues first, implementing a foundation formula will only shuffle inequities, not address them head on.

The VSA agrees implementing a foundation formula in Vermont could be an effective way to increase equity for students as long as it is done within the context of creating scale and is safeguarded from political expediency. To be very clear:

1. A foundation formula, on its own, does not provide equitable funding to Vermont students.
 - a. It provides the same dollar amount per pupil to each district, but districts are not equally structured. Districts that are set up efficiently will deliver more for each student with the same dollars. Districts that are less efficient will deliver less for each student. Equal funding per student per district is not the same as equitable funding for Vermont students.
2. A foundation formula does not save money
 - a. It “saves money” like cutting a grocery budget saves money when I haven’t figured out why food is so expensive. It is simply spending less without addressing the underlying cost drivers. The result is I either starve myself or I am forced to dig deeper into the pantry. Maybe I’ll find enough in there to make a meal or maybe I’ll go hungry. That will be a local decision. As it currently exists, Act 73 proposes to restrain spending (cutting the grocery budget) via a foundation formula without significantly addressing inefficiencies that exist at the school level (why food costs so much) and leaves the decisions about whether to create efficiency or not up to local communities (see what I can make from the pantry or go hungry). Put plainly, it avoids doing the hard work at the state level and puts the responsibility on local leaders, elected and otherwise, to do the heavy lifting. In some cases students will benefit from decisions to create efficiency, in other cases students will be disadvantaged in favor of keeping what we’ve always had..
3. A foundation formula should be implemented after efficiencies of scale have been achieved throughout the state at both the district and school levels
 - a. If the intent is for the newly formed districts to create efficiencies at the school level, new districts should be given the authority, time, and guardrails to do this work before a foundation formula is implemented, otherwise we are just shuffling inequities
 - b. The VSA respects the need to address affordability in a meaningful way in the very near future. However, inserting a cap on spending as proposed in S.220, without doing the hard work of creating scale first, while also on the cusp of a major overhaul to the education delivery and funding system, risks eroding trust in communities, may interfere with our ability to address inefficiencies, and most importantly risks harming students. Either do the work to reduce costs by creating scale or accept that costs will remain high

to keep what we have. Forcing a cap only further hangs local leaders out to dry to solve our state's problems and perpetuates inequities for our students.

- c. To help ensure equitable student funding within a foundation formula the VSA supports:
 - i. Minimum class size requirements (already in Act 73)
 - ii. Small by necessity requirements. VSA recommends turning to research on school scale and building on the "small by necessity" work done by the State Board."
 - iii. Establish staffing ratios. Without equity in staffing levels we can't equitably deliver foundation formula dollars.
 - iv. Negotiate statewide contracts for teachers, support staff and administrators. Without equity in compensation for employees we can't equitably deliver foundation formula dollars.
 - v. Provide construction money to receiving schools that need more space to educate students from a school that closed. This is part of the upfront cost of creating scale. If we don't invest so that school facilities can educate enough students to achieve scale efficiencies we can't equitably deliver foundation formula dollars.
 - vi. Make thoughtful decisions about which schools to operate sooner rather than later so we are not investing in school construction projects on schools that may end up closing. We simply can't afford to fix school buildings only to have the work undone or redone when the school is repurposed.
4. A foundation formula should not incentivize identifying students with disabilities
5. A foundation formula should not include a supplemental spending provision unless it is a transition tool
 - a. If we are going to do all of this work to create a foundation formula and create equitable student funding by addressing inefficiencies, why would we include a provision that undoes this work even a little? This is especially true if the driving force behind much larger districts is to try and equalize the grand list value per pupil of those districts so that districts can equitably raise dollars beyond the foundation formula.
6. A foundation formula serves students best in an SD not an SU. SDs:
 - a. Are much more efficient which improves affordability and opportunity by requiring fewer dollars to operate and directs more of those dollars directly to students.

Response to the work of the School District Redistricting Task Force

The VSA has great appreciation for the time, care, and thoughtful effort the School District Redistricting Task Force dedicated to this important work. Their findings helped illuminate a reality many of us

experience on a daily basis: that many of the challenges we face in educating students in Vermont are rooted in our lack of scale. In essence, the Task Force calls for creating Cooperative Education Service Areas, comprehensive high schools, and a reduction in the number of school districts. The VSA supports all three of these concepts.

The Task Force's exploration of Cooperative Education Service Areas is a promising way to address some of the challenges facing Vermont and is a concept worth pursuing. There are ways CESAs would improve the affordability, equity and opportunity of education in Vermont. However, without careful consideration and great intentionality they may only add a layer of bureaucracy. For example if the CESA assumes responsibility for services that districts already provide efficiently at scale or if a CESA establishes its own executive leadership, finance and HR functions, special education director, curriculum leader etc. while districts are still required by statute, contract, or operational necessity to maintain parallel roles locally, the result is duplication rather than consolidation. In short, the details matter and VSA is here to help with the details. Even if implemented well CESAs alone will not produce the affordability, equity or increased opportunity Vermont students and taxpayers deserve.

Comprehensive high schools would be an effective way to improve access to CTE programming for Vermont students, which is certainly an area we have room to grow in. Presently, some CTE centers don't have enough capacity for the number of students interested, while other CTE centers have many vacant seats. In some places students need to travel many miles to access CTE programming while others walk down the hall in their school to access programming. Moving to regional comprehensive high schools could be an opportunity to address both of these issues and also contribute significantly to achieving scale at the high school level.

The VSA agrees we need fewer school districts in Vermont. We feel strongly these should be school districts and not supervisory unions. Their size should be supported by research and what makes sense for Vermont. VSA suggests district sizes of approximately 2,000-4,000 students. The Task Force recommends we achieve this through voluntary mergers. While we agree that a thoughtful approach to school district consolidation that accounts for anticipated future enrollment is important, we are less confident that a voluntary process will achieve the reductions needed. Leaning on my own experience, communities seem to have little appetite for taking action to reduce school districts. Eight years ago Addison County superintendents advocated to the Secretary of Education to reduce our then three school districts (four with our independent CTE district) down to one for all of the reasons we are talking about reducing districts today. We did not receive support for this. Several years later two of those same three districts, MAUSD and ANWSD, spent eighteen months engaged in a merger study process and got so far as to hold a vote on merger in our two communities. That vote failed by a very wide margin. Soon after one of the five towns in my district successfully withdrew and is now their own district. A second town followed suit and voted to withdraw only to be denied by one of the other member towns. Last week

individuals in that town once again began actively generating interest in another attempt to withdraw from MAUSD in response to conversations the MAUSD board is currently having that involve the possibility of closing schools. This seems like an indication that despite clear signals from the Governor's office and Legislative Leadership that we need to reduce school districts and schools, some communities are willing to increase school districts if it helps ensure they get to keep their town school. In my ten years as superintendent in Addison County, despite multiple attempts by superintendents and some boards to reduce the number of districts, we have increased from four districts to five, and very nearly six, all while losing hundreds of students. We now have five, possibly moving toward six, school districts and serve a little over 4,000 students. I share this with you as an example of the very real political dynamic playing out in communities that cause me and many fellow superintendents to question if voluntary mergers will get the job done.

Of everything I have shared with you today I hope you take away the message that the VSA shares your goals for Act 73 to create a more affordable and equitable education system that increases opportunities for Vermont students. We want you to know we stand ready as a willing and able partner who brings the experience, expertise and knowledge to help make this transformation as successful and smooth as possible for Vermont students, educators and taxpayers. Thank you for your time and we look forward to partnering with you.