

MEMORANDUM

TO: SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FROM: SETH BONGARTZ
DATE: FEBRUARY 26, 2025
RE: EDUCATION GOVERNANCE PROPOSAL

The administration has proposed an overhaul of Vermont's education infrastructure with two main elements, switching to a foundation system for funding and to move from 52 supervisory unions (SU's") and 119 districts to a system with no Supervisory Unions and five large districts. Our work to date has focused on the governance portion of the proposal while the Senate Finance Committee has focused on the funding portion.

The first step in a complete overhaul of Vermont's education system is to establish the governance infrastructure under which the system will operate. It is hard to work out the financing until the governance structure is established. Much of the testimony we have taken for the last two months has been focused thereon.

My sense is that we all agree that the administration's governance model has merit. Larger districts and SU's have the advantage of being able to offer more specialized services, the cost of which cannot be justified with our current system of small districts and SU's. Superintendents, boards and staff can think systemically, building support systems and providing specialized services that can be shifted from school to school as needed. We are in line with the administration's goals of economic efficiency and enhanced opportunity for Vermont's children. We want to help the administration achieve those goals. But, we also heard testimony to the effect that Vermont's historic settlement patterns, its mountains, travel ways, its existing education infrastructure and different means of delivering education to Vermont's children make a one size fits all approach problematic.

There is also a near universal sense that the proposed Chittenden, Addison, Grand Isle district is oversized and that the areas involved do not necessarily relate well to each other.

The following proposal melds the administration's objectives with the realities of Vermont on the ground. It creates a combination of 9 large governance units: six supervisory districts ("SD's"), three supervisory unions ("SU's") and the two existing small interstate districts. The three SU's each contain a combination operating and non-operating districts – a structure we have today. However, each of the districts will achieve greater scale than we have today by requiring consolidation of districts with like governance structures, such as, for example, fully operating, partially operating, or fully non-operating districts.

The proposal recognizes the vital role of independent schools and tuitioning in the three newly created SU's, even as it eliminates tuitioning in areas where it is not critical to the involved communities. For instance, tuitioning is eliminated in Grand Isle because the vast majority of those students attend public schools. The proposal also makes a key distinction among independent schools -- those that are vital to their communities by serving large numbers of public tuition students and those that serve few public tuition students. Not surprisingly, most independent schools are in non-operating districts where public options are either limited or non-existent. Independent schools located in operating districts would no longer be eligible to receive tuition dollars. Those schools that are located in non-operating districts within the three newly created SU's would have to have had 25 percent of their students bring tuition dollars in the 2023/2024 school year in order to continue to receive tuition students under the new construct.

The attached maps, in order, show the following:

1. The proposed large district, SU and interstate compact district boundaries.

2. The district lines within the Bennington-Rutland SU, the Northeast SU and the White River SU.

If you agree that the proposal is worthy of consideration, we can begin taking testimony and, with that testimony in-hand, move toward drafting for this part of the overall task. Doing so will, in turn, provide the necessary framework for the Finance Committee to do its part of the job and for the Government Operations Committee to think through the voting wards for the election of members of the newly created school boards