

NEK Day 2025: Senate Education Testimony

February 20, 2025

Good afternoon Senators. Happy Northeast Kingdom Day! I am Sean McMannon, superintendent of the Kingdom East SD serving the wonderful towns of Burke, Concord, Lunenburg, Lyndon, Newark, Sheffield, Sutton and Wheelock. I think that I bring a unique perspective since I spent the first 22 years of my educational career in VT in Chittenden County serving Charlotte, Hinesburg, Shelburne, St. George and Shelburne as the CVU principal and Winooski as their superintendent. In my year and a half in the Kingdom I have come to appreciate and love the people and the place. Kingdom Trails, Lake Willoughby, Newark Pond, Mt. Pisgah, VAST trails, I could go on forever about the beautiful and plethora of outdoor recreation opportunities that make the NEK a highly-sought after destination. NEK folks have welcomed me with warmth and support, they are family and community-centered and will do anything to help others in need, in fact their values are remarkably similar to the New American families I worked with in Winooski. And what I have noticed since being in the NEK is their so-called “resilience”, their rural toughness and self-sufficiency sometimes is used as a rationale to not provide the necessary resources. Three significant needs in the NEK are Housing, Access to Health Care and Flood Planning and Response:

Housing

- * Make housing affordable and accessible to citizens of the NEK in order to drive economic development, create jobs, promote community development, and attract new residents.
- * Ease Act 250 and other regulatory burdens in ways that reflect the challenges of rural communities, but retains the landscape we depend on.
- * All of these will help attract and retain quality teachers for our public school system which currently struggles mightily due to the lack of affordable housing.

Rural Health Care Access

- * Strengthen and support our rural health care institutions like North Country Hospital and Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital (NVRH), who play a vital role in providing life-sustaining care to communities with lower access to other health care options.
- * Support access to all health care services in rural areas which present unique challenges for our citizens.
- * Our students and staff miss valuable instructional time and work hours due to the proximity of and level of care available

Flooding Planning and Response

- * Invest in systems to help rural communities with emergency planning and mobilization, to provide quick access to necessary resources in times of disaster, and to support local volunteer efforts in their immediate relief and long-term recovery work.
- * Invest in infrastructure to withstand our new climate disasters, including roads, water and wastewater systems, and food infrastructure.
- * Invest in a workforce that can help develop climate resilient housing and community resources located in areas outside the flood zone.
- * I was shocked to experience the difference in response and support for the NEK during the second flood this past summer. The Kingdom United Resilience & Recovery Effort (**KURRVE**) did an amazing job coordinating and were sorely lacking support from across the State. I reached out to municipal colleagues in Chittenden County this past summer and sent teams and equipment and shared that most of their resources had been deployed to the Montpelier-Barre area so the NEK did not get what it needed in a timely manner. I urge you to ensure this does not happen in the future.

Lastly, with Education Transformation being the topic of the session I would ask you to consider the following relative to the NEK: While all VT communities tend to see their unique qualities I think we can all agree that the NEK, home to many small rural communities and schools has very different geographic and facility conditions that require great creativity and collaboration to meet the needs of students within the current educational proposals. And even within the NEK there are differences that need to be recognized. For example, our district, Kingdom East, operates seven schools serving eight towns of various sizes. We could move toward larger schools to create more learning opportunities for students but we need school construction aid. The North Country SU has a completely different set of challenges given their geography and proximity of schools for potential school reconfiguration. Thanks for your time, your leadership and please always consider the needs of our unique and incredible NEK region and most importantly, our NEK people!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jean M. Manno". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Superintendent, Kingdom East School District (KESD)