

## **Testimony Before the Vermont Senate Committee on Education**

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NEK Choice School District Board, Essex North SU Board

### **Chairperson and Members of the Committee,**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am a resident of Lemington, Vermont, an alum of the NEK Collaborative's Community Builders cohort, and a member of both my local school and supervisory union boards. I'm here to highlight the unique challenges faced by Essex County and the Northeast Kingdom (NEK) and to emphasize the need for statewide policy and financial decisions that reflect the realities of our micro-rural communities.

The **NEK Choice School District** was formed as a collaborative effort among ten geographically isolated rural towns, united by a shared challenge: none of us had a local school. In coming together, we realized we also shared a common goal—to strengthen our voice and ensure equitable educational opportunities through school choice. Today, we **tuition approximately 300 students to 38 schools across Vermont and New Hampshire**, a necessity due to geographic isolation and the lack of nearby school infrastructure.

Governor Scott has said, "*A reform plan for the state needs to work for the whole state.*" This is particularly relevant for Essex County, which has some of the lowest population densities in Vermont. Delivering education and healthcare in our region presents unique difficulties. Vast distances, limited infrastructure, and geographic isolation—exacerbated by large, uninhabited areas like the Unified Towns and Gores—create barriers to access. Some of our communities are cut off from much of Vermont by expansive forestland, and as a result, their needs often go unaddressed.

It is critical to recognize that **expertise on these challenges exists within the NEK**. Whether in **education finance, healthcare, or economic development**, our region has professionals and community leaders who can offer insight at a granular level. We are more than willing to connect you with local experts to inform your decision-making.

We understand that no single voice can fully capture the complexity of these issues, and we are committed to being a resource for this committee. If there are areas where we cannot immediately provide answers, we will connect you with those who can. Our goal is to be a constructive partner in shaping policies that work for **all** of Vermont—not just its more urbanized areas.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to these important issues. I welcome any questions and look forward to working together. **Respectfully submitted, Sharon Ellingwood 603-682-6097**

# NEK CHOICE SD

100% non-operating district  
 100% school choice K-12  
 309 students in 2024  
 sent 38 schools in VT & NH

2024: 309 students  
 sent to 38 schools in VT /NH  
 poorest area of VT

most elderly residents per capita in VT by county  
 no schools in 10 towns, 75% of the entire county's sq mileage  
 extreme geographic isolation to services for students  
 do any legislators in Montpelier reside in Essex County?

