

Thank you, Senators, for the time and care you are investing in exploring solutions to the critical challenges facing public education in Vermont.

While I speak to you today as a school leader representing a district and Supervisory Union that I am deeply privileged to work in, I cannot separate that role from my experience as a taxpayer facing continued increases in property taxes, nor from my time as a school board member and co-chair of an Act 46 Steering Committee. I understand how complex these questions are, and how discussions of consolidation, school closure, and local control can leave communities wary and uncertain.

I have spent most of my adult life in education. I have worked as a custodian, taught across all grade levels including college, worked as a counselor and served as an administrator for the past decade. Rather than re-enter a conversation focused solely on structure, I want to speak to the **intentional work required to create meaningful opportunities for students**—and how strong systems and community partnerships make that work possible.

White River Valley Middle School was one of the first schools in Vermont to adopt the **Community Schools model**, and that decision fundamentally reshaped our approach. Through coordinated partnerships with local health providers and mental health agencies, we built wraparound supports that strengthen families and improve students' readiness to learn. These systems have led to measurable improvements in school climate and meaningful reductions in chronic absenteeism, allowing us to focus more fully on universal approaches that ensure every day counts for every student. [reference Bob DiGiulio at Hazen doing very similar work that ties directly to the growing industry in Hardwick and the Union member towns]

Just as importantly, the Community Schools model has allowed us to **expand learning opportunities earlier and more intentionally**. We are bringing specialized programming to younger students—such as work-based learning experiences beginning as early as seventh grade and providing access to algebra for seventh- and eighth-grade students. These are not add-ons; they are part of a broader commitment to **Flexible Pathways** that meet learners where they are, honor their interests, and help them plan for life beyond high school.

Through our partnership with the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative, we also serve as a hub for middle and high school students from well beyond our Supervisory Union. This is a cost-effective way to expand access across large geographic areas while maintaining strong connections to home schools and communities. These systems work because they are designed around students' lives. I genuinely do not know how we would expect similar outcomes outside of the distance learning model if students were spending one to two hours a day on a bus in a much larger merged district.

Innovation is another core tenet of our work. Our investment in STEAM education led to the development of a robust makerspace that blends traditional and modern technologies—from looms and sewing machines to CNC programming, laser engravers, vinyl cutters, and 3D printers. These hands-on experiences build critical thinking and transferable skills aligned with

today's workforce. Our goal is not only graduation, but helping students develop skills that allow them to remain employed, engaged, and invested in the Vermont communities they care deeply about.

An important—and sometimes overlooked—outcome of this community-driven model has been a **substantial improvement in our interactions with parents and caregivers**. Trust has grown, and conversations have shifted from frustration to collaboration. Recent feedback from families has been clear: we need to do a better job communicating the wide range of opportunities available to students. That feedback is driving real change in how we share information and how we partner with families in planning pathways to graduation.

Our community connections have also expanded capacity beyond what we could do alone. Through a partnership with the University of Vermont and the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, interns worked alongside community organizations on projects that strengthened the towns we serve—further embedding schools into their communities and maximizing available resources.

At the same time, we are realistic about current challenges. We continue to address chronic absenteeism in close collaboration with health and human services partners, while experiencing increasing strain on those agencies. These partnerships are essential, but they require proximity, coordination, and long-term sustainability to remain effective.

Throughout all of this, we have remained committed to **responsible fiscal stewardship**. We believe it is possible—and necessary—to be fiscally responsible while maximizing existing resources and continuing to evolve our system to fulfill the vision of Flexible Pathways. In our schools, we stress the importance of finding a meaningful pathway to graduation for every student.

As you consider the future of public education in Vermont, I encourage you to look closely at how opportunity is created in practice—through relationships, proximity, and community investment—and how distance, scale, and access affect students' readiness to learn and communities' sense of voice.

Thank you for your time and for your thoughtful consideration of how we can strengthen public education while honoring the communities it serves.