

Testimony to Senate Education Committee
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on NEK Day.

I come today representing the Canaan Schools as well as the Regional Education Collaboration Working Group of Essex North Supervisory Union, North Country Supervisory Union and Orleans Central Supervisory Union. I have two main points to make today in this testimony, but first I would like to express our support for S214, which would provide PreK tuition for our NEK Choice students who attend school in New Hampshire. If we want an “equal and equitable education for all Vermont students,” we should not be withholding a strong educational foundation from a handful of our youngest students.

But my two main points today are these:

- 1) Our rural K-12 schools would be starved out of existence by the definition of “small school” in Act 73, and
- 2) It is physically impossible to provide an “equal and equitable education” to all Vermont students **wholly within the State of Vermont.**

Act 73 defines a “small school” as one having “fewer than 100 students.” That is the equivalent of “fewer than 20 students per grade,” which is how “small school” is defined on the AoE website under Small Schools Grants (<https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/financial-reports/small-school-grants>). Act 73 does not include the second part of that definition, however. A K-12 school with fewer than 100 students would have fewer than 10 students per grade. By any metric, that would be considered “small,” but depriving our rural K-12 schools of small schools weighting would be a consequence of Act 73. So that raises the question of “What is a 'school'?”

I have raised this question in every forum I have attended in the past year: the Redistricting Task Force, the Small and Sparse by Necessity definition group, the Commission on the Future of Vermont Education, and even the Rural School Community Alliance. All of them ducked the question, saying that defining “a school” was not their job. RSCA went so far as seeming to support us while actually undermining us by recommending some kind of sliding scale of weights for schools over 100 but under 200.

Under “Vermont Schools” on the AoE website, it says “Public and independent schools are commonly but not exclusively divided into three tiers of primary and secondary education: elementary school, middle school or junior high school and high school” (<https://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools>). The directory of Vermont schools lists principals, so the definition of a “school” seems to be that it has one principal, no matter how many grades it has. In that list, Canaan is listed as “Canaan Schools,” with an 's'. Those of you who came to Canaan clearly saw that we have two separate buildings, with a sign in front of one that says “Canaan Memorial High School” and on the other that says “Canaan Elementary School.” We also have a tech center, which is attached to the elementary school but on a different level. We save money by having one principal for all three schools, but that fiscal efficiency seems to make us one 'school’ in the eyes of the State and, under Act 73, would cost us half a million

dollars. We could hire a couple more principals for that amount of money, if that's what we would need to do, but I'm pretty sure that that's not you want us to do.

While the other rural K-12s in our region may only have one building and one principal, they are at least two “schools,” a K-6 elementary and a 7-12 high school. They may share some staff (nurses, guidance counselors, mental health staff, special education and “specials” teachers) and some spaces (gym, art and music rooms, cafeteria), but these are cost efficiencies; they do not make them one “school.” The primary educational experiences of the students remain largely separate. Most of them—Cabot, Craftsbury, Danville, Twinfield—have fewer than 100 in each “school” but more than 100 in the combined schools. Seventy-five students in each times the \$3157 per student in Act 73 (Sec. 36 16 V.S.A. §4019) is just under half a million dollars per district. For our small schools, that is a lot of money. Our tech centers also do not receive Perkins Grant money because our class sizes are too small.

I do have to give credit where credit is due. Canaan's Community Schools grant has been a godsend. It allows us to provide afterschool and summer enrichment activities for the kids and adult education classes. Our adult woodworking class was so over-enrolled that we had to add more. A number of community members have stepped up to provide classes in CPR and First Aid, Bread Baking, Tai Chi, and Conversational French.

Small K-12 schools are a feature, not a quirk of the Vermont educational landscape. They allow all the students in a district to learn together as well as serving as the hub of the community. Everyone who wants to gets to play on the varsity team, except maybe in basketball, because if they didn't there would be no team, and everyone in the community turns out to watch them play. Some of our small high schools combine to form teams; Canaan combines with Pittsburg NH for sports. I have taught in very small schools, and there is something magical about them. The relationships among students, teachers and staff is as close as family, sometimes closer. The girls in my sons' classes were their sisters; they worked with teachers during the summers, refining their building trades skills. When my oldest son, who at the time was the Director of STEM Education for the State of Massachusetts, was remodeling his house, the roofers were amazed after seeing him, on one day, tearing out plaster and building walls and, the next, going off to his “real job” in a suit. They asked, “If you have a job that requires a suit, how do you know how to do all this stuff?” His response: “I'm from Vermont.”

If our students were forced to travel over an hour each way to attend larger high schools, they would not be able to play any sports at all because of time and travel constraints, if they even could make the team. Nor would they be able to participate in other afterschool activities: the chess club, the robotics club, the math club, etc. This is not “equal and equitable.”

Those of you who came to Canaan got a firsthand look at how far it is from any other school in Vermont. If you took the “all Vermont” route, the only school you passed in the last 40 miles was Brighton Elementary School in Island Pond, which, by the way, is in the North Country Supervisory Union. If you took the safe winter route over Rte 2 to Lancaster NH and up Rte 3, which is the one we take in the winter, you would pass, in the last 40 miles, two elementary schools, a high school, a K-8 school and a K-12 school. If you didn't take a left in West Stewartstown to cross into Canaan (and you can see the Canaan schools from there), and kept going on Rte 3 for another ten miles, you would pass a K-8 school and reach the K-12 in Pittsburg. On the Vermont side, Canaan is extremely remote; on the river side, it is not. Our NEK Choice students on the east side of the district who do not go to Canaan attend school in New Hampshire. Thus, while it would be a bus ride of well over an hour for our high school students to get to the nearest high school in Vermont, it is a 15 minute ride to two other high schools across the river. Of the three K-12 schools within a ten mile radius, Canaan is the most

centrally located and the only one with a tech center.

While I spent most of my long career in education teaching teachers, I have taught at all the schools in SAU#7 and SAU#58 and one in SAU#20 in New Hampshire as well as at Canaan in one capacity or another. All of them were within a relatively easy commute of my home in Canaan; no school in Vermont besides Canaan was. I know that you don't want any "carve outs" to Act 73, but you can't defy the laws of physics and geography; it is physically impossible to provide an "equal and equitable educational experience" to Canaan students wholly within the State of Vermont. Canaan has to have a carve out.

We do, however, support the Task Force's recommendation of CESAs. We are already working with the Regional Education Collaboration Working Group of ENSU, NCSU, and OCSU and talking about services we could share in order to find cost efficiencies. We have great respect for our friends in the other SUs and look forward to working with them as we go forward, but the distances—and winter driving conditions—make cooperation with NH districts more sensible. As New Hampshire moves forward with their own redistricting efforts, SAU#7 and SAU#58 might be more motivated to reenter talks about consolidation with ENSU cross-river. It should not be put on ENSU to make that happen; we need help from both states. Without support from the States, at least allow us to engage in more collaboration with NH schools and/or support our small school financially rather than deprive us of funds by using a definition of "small" that seems to have been intended to apply to K-5 or K-6 town schools in rural areas of the state. You claim to not be trying to close small schools; then don't starve us to death.

Thank you for listening.