

**Vermont Senate  
Senate Education Committee**

**Testimony of Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, White River Valley Supervisory Union**

I want to begin by thanking the Senate Education Committee for allowing me to testify along with my other colleagues that have joined the Rural School Community Alliance. My name is Jamie Kinnarney and I have the privilege of serving as the Superintendent of Schools of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. I will refer to our supervisory union as the WRVSU for the remainder of my testimony.

The WRVSU serves ten towns and six school districts. The towns served are Bethel - Chelsea - Granville - Hancock - Rochester - Royalton - Sharon - Stockbridge - Strafford - Tunbridge. We were formed through the consolidation of the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union and Orange Windsor Supervisory Union. We also consolidated from ten town school districts into six (four unified and two town school districts) during the implementation period of Act 46. In addition, our supervisory union serves towns from across three counties (Addison, Orange, and Windsor). I share all of this to give you a visual representation of the size and scope of the work that occurs at the WRVSU.

The WRVSU serves approximately 1700 students via the following operational structures:

District	Grades Operated
Granville/Hancock	Non-operational
Rochester/Stockbridge	PreK-6
White River Unified District (Bethel and Royalton)	PreK-12
First Branch Unified District (Chelsea and Tunbridge)	PreK-8
Sharon	PreK-6
Strafford	K-8

I want to thank the Senate Education Committee for your continued consideration and support of the supervisory union structure as a viable governance structure for Vermont's schools.

I believe that the supervisory union structure is currently being blamed by many for the cost drivers that are placing stress on the education fund. I have come to this conclusion based on the fact that one thing that appears to be common throughout many of the policy proposals, testimony, and introduced bills provided (outside of your committee) is that we must move forward with the supervisory district structure while eliminating the remaining supervisory unions.

This has been argued for due to projected efficiencies, ease of governance, fewer district Boards (which equates to less community voice, involvement, and democracy,) and has been proposed as a means to increase "equity" by Secretary Saunders.

I, for one, have significant concerns that these proposed mega districts (per Vermont standards) are going to dismantle the essential work that has been done on our Flexible Pathways, Personalized Learning, and Act 67 Community Schools work. Those efforts are personalized, individualized and have resulted in significant successes for our students and greater communities. Yes, community voice and connection to schools matter, and we need further support in this area, not new barriers for that essential work to continue supporting learners into the future.

I continue to review testimony, policy proposals, and bills that have been introduced with a lack of clarity on what our current state data provides in regards to education spending among some of our larger and smaller districts, while being very clear that the data on spending via the supervisory union and district structure doesn't provide any clear evidence of projected savings. In fact, our rural school districts that make up supervisory union structures are often some of our most fiscally responsible districts throughout the state.

For example, White River Unified District (Bethel and Royalton) is a merged PreK-12 district within the WRVSU that serves approximately 675 students. This merger occurred voluntarily in nature through the provisions provided via Act 46. It has been a success due in large part because it was voluntary, allowed for local voice to occur throughout the merger process, and resulted in a shared mission and vision for its students. All of those are critical to ensuring a district's success. The results have been increased student achievement in both math and literacy, more opportunities for our students via Personalized Learning/Pathways, and documented fiscal sustainability.

## Long-Term Fiscal Trends for White River Unified District (Bethel/Royalton):

Bethel Education Tax Rate down 1.1% over the last 5 years or \$34 savings on \$200,000 assessed property value.

Royalton Education Tax Rate down 12.6% over the last 5 years or \$412 savings on \$200,000 assessed property value.

	White River Unified District	State Average
Budget Growth	5.7%	6.1%
5 Year Annual Growth	4.6%	6.1%
Per Pupil Spending Growth	2.3%	7.0%
Per weighted pupil spending	\$12,252	\$14,091

I share this as an example that some of our smaller unified district schools have and continue to work diligently to increase opportunities for our students while delivering on fiscal responsibility and sustainability.

Furthermore, when you begin to research the economy of scale through research conducted across the country, you begin to realize that the research is either contrary or inconclusive in nature (I've heard this referred to as nuanced). That can't be glanced over when we are talking about creating a future policy proposal that promises savings; while knowing full well that the only projected savings that the policy proposal promises is if local community schools are closed while also requiring students to be placed on expensive school buses (yes, those contracted services are incredibly expensive) for upwards to 90 minutes one way. I base this claim on 90 minutes because the bills introduced on elementary school district structures would require ALL of my elementary schools to close and combine into two centralized elementary schools that would result in many of our students being on buses upwards to 75-90 minutes.

That's a big decision, and it is one that better have clear data and research behind it because if we get this wrong, the results are going to be incredibly harmful to our students and the greater trajectory of our state.

What family chooses to move to a town that requires their six-year-old to be placed on a bus for more than 75 minutes? That question within itself poses a litany of concern for me when we speak of equity and doing right by our students.

I come back to my earlier conclusion regarding “why” everyone seems to be in consensus that the supervisory union structure is to blame for our current fiscal concerns with the education fund. The only conclusion that I can come to regarding the “why” is because the proposed change in governance removes local control and creates an “opportunity” for larger districts to close schools without having any true sense of the impact or harm that might occur to those towns and our students currently served.

What might my solutions be regarding how we create better efficiency and sustainability given our perceived crisis and the rhetoric that we’ve all been subjected to over the past two years?

- 1) SLOW DOWN during these Reactionary Times and create a commission that researches and provides a report on the actual cost drivers and stressors on the education fund.
  - a) There has been a tremendous amount of increase in the number of FTEs throughout the state in response to the pandemic, with specific attention needed in the area of student support services.
  - b) We continue to see increased health insurance premiums in the double digits year-in and year-out.
- 2) Create accountability measures to combat these cost drivers that hold school districts accountable for delivering on education quality standards while ensuring a comprehensive system of supports and early intervention system is fully operational and implemented with fidelity.
- 3) Create a plan of stability and sustainability that looks at the broader picture of an interconnected framework of health and human services and the agency of education that focuses on preventative and proactive models of student support instead of reactionary measures that result in increased spending.
  - a) Are these cost drivers most transparent in the education fund or the general fund?
- 4) Provide for a funding system that has accountability measures built within it.
- 5) Work closely with the field and task your field experts with creating proposals that work to best support students while creating efficiency and sustainability.
  - a) The field is only being included to check a box, and it hasn’t resulted in true and authentic engagement.
  - b) It feels like the rural community school and town voice has been lost and not engaged in finding common sense solutions.

- c) Not to rush into anything that might have long-standing negative impacts on our current and future students.

I want to conclude by acknowledging that I'm a product of our public education system. I'm a first-generation college graduate who was raised by an incredibly hard-working farm family. I attended both Lyndon State (BS) and Castleton State (MA), where I was provided an opportunity to receive my college education while being supported by my teachers and professors as an individual.

Hence, why I am so incredibly passionate about the importance of our Community School work. I am a product of those efforts, and that personalization is why I'm privileged enough to be able to sit in front of you all to deliver this testimony today. I have asked and will continue to ask that we all pause in these reactionary times to make certain that we have an education plan moving forward that doesn't allow for any of our students to fall through the cracks, ensures a personalized education, and has the supports and enrichment needed for every learner to reach their greatest potential.

It behooves us not to rush to a solution prior to fully understanding the problem when our students' futures and our state's viability moving forward is at risk.

Respectfully submitted,

Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, WRVSU