



Testimony to Senate Education Committee
April 8, 2025
By Jeanne Albert, Ph.D.
Steering Committee Member, Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)

Good morning. Thank you, Chair Bongartz, for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you as well to each of the members of this committee for your thoughtful efforts.

My name is Jeanne Albert. I live in Lincoln and serve as Chair of the Lincoln School District Board. I am a life-long educator and retired professor of mathematics, most recently at Middlebury, where I also worked for over a decade as the Director of Quantitative Support in the College's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research.

RSCA advocates for the importance of rural community public schools and for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future. The rapid expansion of our newly-formed organization demonstrates that concern for the future of public education is alive and well in Vermont, and that folks in rural school districts across the state want their voices to be heard. ***The Alliance celebrates this expression of civic activity, especially in a time when strengthening democratic engagement is as important as ever.***

My testimony today focuses on RSCA recommendations in the following three critical areas.

1. Governance

Allow the Commission on the future of public education in Vermont to continue its work, including the essential public engagement that has just begun. Developing, implementing, and assessing the impact of a new funding system will require extreme care and focused effort across state government, including the Agency of Education, the State Board of Education, the Joint Fiscal Office, the Treasurer's Office, the Tax Department, and others. Therefore:

- **We do not recommend making sweeping changes to our governance structures at the same time as undertaking a complete restructuring of our education funding system.**
- **If changes to our governance structures are considered in the future, we urge continued use of the multi-district supervisory union governance model**, especially in rural areas.
- **We encourage expanded union and comprehensive high school models**, and other locally-informed approaches to enrollment decline at the secondary level.

2. Foundation Formula

We can support moving to an education foundation formula, that:

- **is grounded in robust research** regarding both the potential benefits and known limitations of larger, merged schools and districts;
- **uses Vermont-specific data, evidence, and community-based knowledge**, and respects the state's geography and democratic traditions, in developing an appropriate education payment;
- **incorporates built-in contingency planning**, so that inevitable uncertainties can be met with appropriate flexibility and potentially harmful disruptions are avoided; and
- **is designed with a full commitment to meeting the equity-of-opportunity requirements of Brigham**, while recognizing and celebrating that such opportunity comes in many forms.

3. Education Tax Reform

We encourage providing immediate tax relief to Vermonters, as well as comprehensive, longer-term changes that will make our education funding system more fair, transparent, and reflective of tax-payers' ability to pay.

1. GOVERNANCE

Recommendations:

Allow the Commission on the future of public education in Vermont to continue its work, including the essential public engagement that has just begun. Don't rush to make sweeping changes to our governance structures before their work is completed.

RSCA believes that thoughtful, appropriate changes in our funding system can bring about meaningful and positive change on its own, and will be a significant undertaking requiring sustained focus. Vermonters have asked for sensible changes to our education funding system, not wholesale restructuring of schools and governance.

If changes to our governance structures are considered in the future, we urge continued use of the multi-district supervisory union governance model, especially in rural areas.

- Question assumptions about the benefits of additional consolidation.**

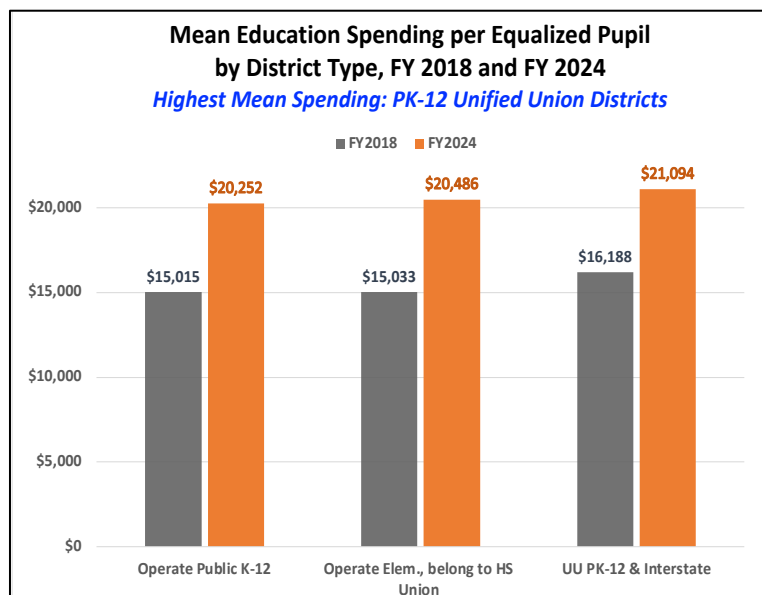
A recent report from University of Vermont Professor Daniella Hall Sutherland states: "There is over 100 years of research on the outcomes of school and district consolidation, yet there is no empirical consensus that consolidation results in reduced educational costs in rural areas (Howley et al., 2011). In Vermont, where 71% of our schools are rural, this research should not be taken lightly. In rural contexts, projected savings are offset by increased transportation costs (Collins, 2019; Killeen & Sipple, 2000), staff salaries (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012), and infrastructure needs (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007.)"

These findings are consistent with research from 2021 that investigated the impact of a recent district consolidation law in Arkansas (McGee, et. al.) and found negligible academic benefits and no financial savings. As the authors summarize: "It is possible that reducing the number of administrative units will pay dividends in the future, but it is also possible that larger districts are less responsive to the needs of individual communities, harming students down the line."

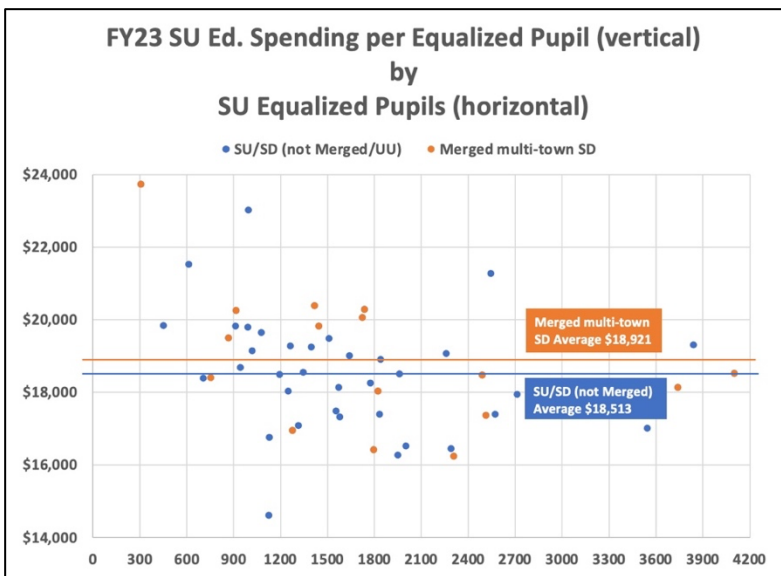
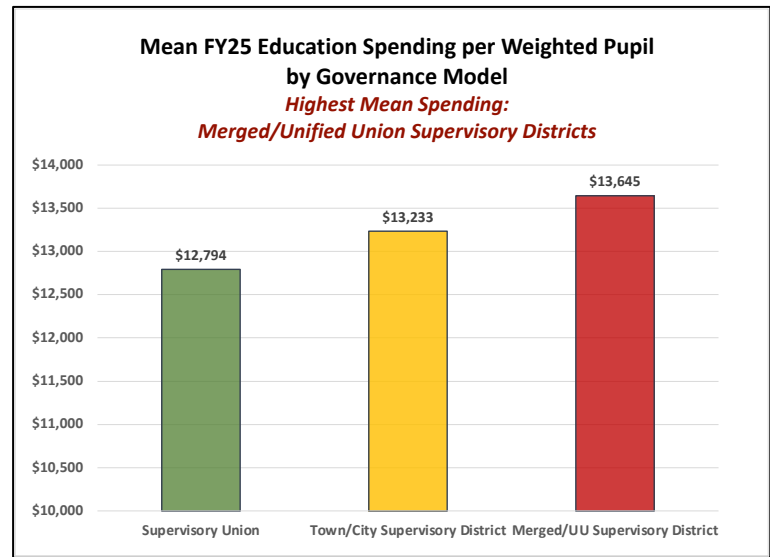
- Use Vermont-specific data and learn from local successes as well as challenges.**

RSCA analysis of Vermont Agency of Education spending data indicates the following trends.

At the K-12 operating district level: merged multi-town school districts spend more per equalized pupil on average than school districts that operate elementary schools and belong to a high school union, and also more per equalized pupil than single-town, K-12 operating districts (FYs 2018 and 2024; see chart at right.)



At the supervisory union level: merged, multi-town supervisory districts spend more per weighted pupil on average than multi-town supervisory unions or single-town supervisory districts (FY25; see chart at right).



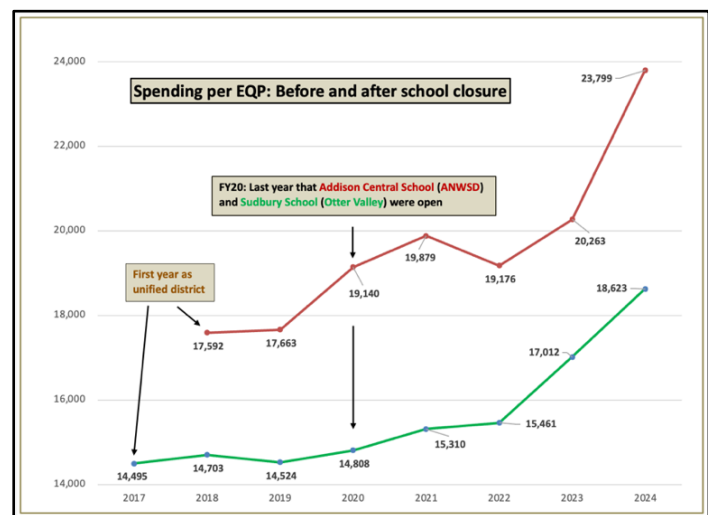
There is only a very weak relationship between size of an SU/SD and per-pupil spending, as indicated in the scatterplot, at left.

This means that, relative to other factors, the size of an SU/SD (measured here by equalized pupils) provides very little predictive information about per-pupil spending.

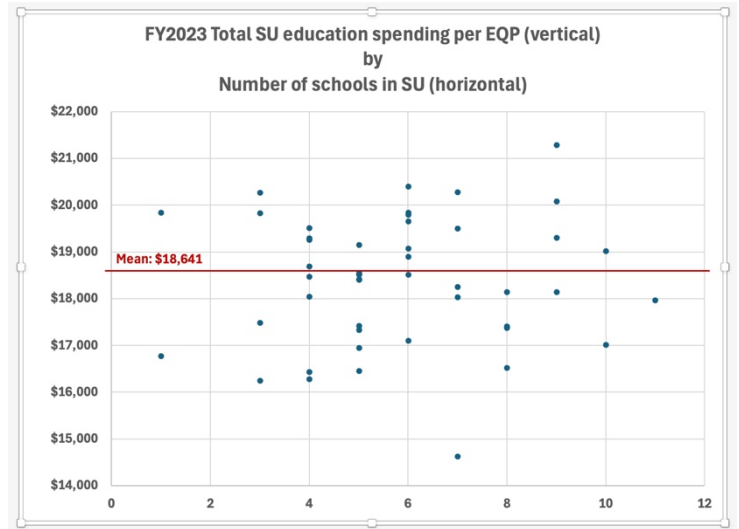
Closing schools has not led to cost savings.

Several districts in Vermont that merged after Act 46 was implemented closed a school within a few years. Despite initial projections of reduced per-pupil spending, the results have been more in line with what the research says: that savings are often offset by other increases. Further, **there are other, non-monetary costs, such as longer time on a bus for children and associated stressors on families.** The chart at right provides two examples illustrating an increase in per-pupil (EQP) spending after school closure.

In addition, while the data for FY26 are still preliminary, it appears that a similar pattern is emerging following the closure of the Roxbury Village School last year.



The number of schools in an SU/SD has very little bearing on per-pupil (EQP) spending. See scatterplot at right.



These examples indicate that the research previously noted, which found limited benefits from school and district consolidation, appears to be highly relevant in Vermont.

At minimum, **these data show that a comprehensive study of Vermont’s schools and governance structures is needed**– before

designing a future-state education payment that incorporates projected savings based on what could be erroneous assumptions around district structure, size, and cost.

In particular, we note that the last report to the legislature on Act 46 district consolidation, dated from 2020, only contained anecdotal information from seven of the 111 impacted school districts and was not released until 2024. What can we learn from a more thorough understanding of the consequences of this law?

• **Understand and respect the difference between multi-town supervisory districts and supervisory unions.**

Many **supervisory districts (SDs)** are made up of formerly independent town school districts, in which local school boards have been dissolved and new boards representing the member towns have been created. While such unified supervisory districts may be appropriate in some regions, in more rural areas these structures: **1) diminish participatory democracy at the local level; 2) distance community members from governance and oversight of their local schools; and 3) aren’t practical to operate, given large geographic distances and sparse population.** Further, as noted above, such merged SDs are on average more costly to operate than other models.

In contrast, a **supervisory union (SU)** is made up of school districts that retain town school boards or small clusters of towns with a joint school board. Locally elected school boards collaborate to achieve cost reductions and efficiencies in service. **The SU model provides a balance between the financial benefits of shared and collaborative services and the community-centered benefits of local and responsive school boards.** Vermont’s diverse geography and population distribution require a nuanced approach and all models should be on the table. Some districts face extreme geographic and population density challenges, making consolidation impractical and counterproductive.

• **Minimize community disruption by respecting democratic processes and local knowledge.** If new governance models are indicated, local education leaders and communities should be empowered to explore potential restructuring that aligns with evidenced-based cost efficiency and educational quality. Evaluation of new structures should not be a one-size-fits-all process.

- Districts must be able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of larger structures—whether as SDs or SUs—without immediate disruption to their existing governance. This approach preserves stability while allowing communities to make informed decisions about potential consolidation or restructuring.
- Local districts, with authentic community input, should be allowed to reimagine supervisory union and school district models in ways that reflect their specific needs while maintaining a balance between collaborative efficiency and local responsiveness.

- **Preserve local governance.**

Participatory democracy is not just a valued tradition in rural Vermont—it is a functional and effective system that enhances public education. Maintaining local governance structures helps ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of Vermont’s diverse communities. Any changes to school district governance must be guided by the democratic process and the practical needs of rural areas.

- Rural school boards play a vital role in supporting schools, solving problems, and ensuring local effectiveness. As members of supervisory union boards, these local boards collaborate as equals, prioritizing the best interests of all students within the union. Their relational trust and cooperative approach foster efficiency without sacrificing local oversight.
- Rural school boards provide significant value at minimal cost, striking a necessary balance between regional efficiency and local responsiveness.

- **Use formal and informal cooperative agreements within and across supervisory unions to achieve greater cost-savings, efficiencies and quality.**

Rather than requiring further consolidation, prime areas to explore cost savings are in technology and software; locally sourced nutrition services that include buying from local farmers; and fiscal services of business managers such as payroll. These offer the potential to increase cost savings, efficiencies and quality while maintaining democratic processes through local districts and school boards.

We encourage expanded union and comprehensive high school models, and other locally-informed approaches to enrollment decline at the secondary level.

Recommendation:

- **Convene regional planning entities to transform secondary education.**

Each region should convene educators, community members, school board members, and youth to develop a robust and practical regional plan for secondary education among existing schools, communities, and career technical centers. Innovative regional opportunities should be considered; for example, utilizing smaller facilities as specialist academies in areas such as the arts or sciences. Each region should receive technical assistance provided by the Agency of Education. The plan developed should be adopted by school boards and voted on by the communities in the region.

2. EDUCATION FUNDING

Recommendations:

The development and design of the education payment must be grounded in robust research regarding both the potential benefits *and* known limitations of larger, merged schools and districts.

As noted above, research on school and district consolidation has found limited benefits. In designing a foundation formula in Vermont, RSCA urges a measured and careful approach that acknowledges this research and the significance of these findings for Vermont, especially in rural areas.

Determination of a state payment must use Vermont-specific data, evidence, and community-based knowledge, and should respect the state’s geography and democratic traditions.

The foundation formula currently under discussion appears to envision an initial state payment that is based on “current-state” per-pupil spending in Vermont. The Alliance is pleased to see consideration of this approach, which we believe will prevent unnecessary and avoidable instability.

We also are encouraged by recent testimony and discussion around using professional judgement panels, especially ones that are designed to surface and understand the unique needs of rural communities, and we recommend using a variety of pedagogical and population-specific panels.

When modeling the features of a foundation formula, we emphasize again the critical importance of Vermont-specific cost and spending data—especially as discussed above, related to district and governance type and size.

The implementation of a foundation formula should include careful contingency planning, so a range of uncertainties can be met with appropriate flexibility.

By its nature, change is disruptive. We are encouraged by discussion of contingency-based structures to address some of this disruption during a potential transition to a new state-payment education funding structure. We support such a built-in approach, including:

- regular (e.g., yearly) base payment inflator provisions for costs such as health care that are rising much faster than average and aren’t captured in inflation indexes; and
- transition parameters or benchmarks, rather than dates certain, to ensure that implementation timeline adjustments can be made, when needed.

A foundation formula must be crafted with a full commitment to meeting the requirements of Bringham, while recognizing and celebrating that such opportunity comes in many forms.

Moving to a foundation formula means abandoning an education funding system that has been in place for decades and that came about in response to severe inequities arising from both the structure and operation of the state’s prior funding scheme. Moving to a new system will require sufficient evidence showing that the new structure will “ensure substantial equality of educational opportunity throughout Vermont,” both by design and in practice.

At this time, RSCA is unable to assess whether the foundation formula that may eventually emerge will meet the *Brigham* standard. We are, however, encouraged by what appears to be a more realistic approach than the Governor’s plan, including prioritizing what is actually an ample, data-determined base amount. Our initial review of the provision allowing for additional district spending beyond the state payment indicates an attempt to minimize the type of funding disparities that such provisions often create. As further details and analysis emerge, the Alliance will continue to study this provision very carefully.

• **School size should not be used as a primary determiner of educational opportunity.**

The Alliance acknowledges the important goal to improve educational opportunity in Vermont, and we believe that a state payment system has the potential to distribute resources more equitably. At the same time, we recognize and celebrate that **equity of educational opportunity comes in many forms**, and that this diversity represents a strength of our small state. In particular, using the size of a school is not, by itself, a valid way to infer greater or lesser opportunity. The research is very clear: smaller schools can provide highly valuable (and highly valued) opportunities for students, some of which are different from what is available in larger schools.

In their 2007 study, *Review of Empirical Evidence about School Size Effects*, Leithwood and Jantzi looked at prior research on several educational outcomes in relation to school size. With respect to student academic achievement, they concluded: “Smaller schools are generally better for most purposes. The weight of evidence provided by the review clearly favors smaller schools for a wide array of student outcomes and most organizational outcomes as well.”

They also reviewed studies on outcomes related to student engagement, and concluded: “The results of all studies indicate significantly stronger student engagement in smaller as compared with larger schools.” Measures of engagement included connectedness and belonging, participation in activities, and school attachment.

In Vermont, these results are confirmed by the observations of many RSCA teachers, parents, students, and community members. Plus, it is a mistake to assume that smaller schools do not offer a varied and engaging curriculum and educational experience. For example, one member notes: “In Craftsbury (PK-12) we are awash in opportunity for our kids in Art, APs, experiential learning, language, sports and extracurriculars, volunteer opportunities, and close-knit community connection. It is NOT an either or.”

3. WE SUPPORT PROVIDING IMMEDIATE TAX RELIEF TO VERMONTERS, AS WELL AS ENHANCING TAX FAIRNESS, TRANSPARENCY, AND EQUITY.

Recommendations:

- **Provide immediate tax relief while enhancing tax fairness in the long-term.**

The Alliance has begun its review of the House Ways and Means proposed Homestead Exemption program that would replace the current “income sensitized” property tax credit (PTC) system. While further review is needed (in particular, how the program will be funded) we appreciate the following:

- the “exemption” construct is simpler to understand than the PTC, and may be simpler to implement;
- it appears that this approach would remove the current “lag” in the PTC;
- the inclusion of more income categories may reduce impacts from tax cliffs; and
- as indicated by JFO analysis, the Committee version under consideration appears to provide more relief than the Governor’s plan to Vermont taxpayers in the lowest income bands.

We are also monitoring income-based tax proposals recommended by Public Assets and others. Since property value is typically a less accurate way to determine ability to pay than income, we hope that an income-based approach remains on the table. As with development of the foundation formula, we urge a thoughtful approach that favors accuracy and understanding over speed and magnitude of change.

- **Improve accountability and oversight.**

Our current pupil weighting and tax system aims to improve education funding equity by providing additional tax capacity to districts, but does not require that this capacity translates to additional resources actually reaching the students who need it. While a state payment appears to be more directly tied to per-pupil spending, sufficient accountability and oversight structures must be developed to ensure that equitable funding is in fact achieved.

- **Pursue a comprehensive approach to healthy students and communities.**

The provision of mental health and other support services in schools has increased dramatically over the past five years, impacted both by the pandemic and by the lack of services available in some regions. This has been both a dramatic cost driver for school districts as well as an area of inequity across the state, especially in rural areas. We should develop a comprehensive approach to the delivery of education and support services to Vermont students and families by exploring successful community-schools models and collaboration between Vermont agencies.

Final Comments

The Alliance hopes the information we've provided will help the Senate Education Committee set a thoughtful course informed by robust research and Vermont-specific data.

While we recognize that improvements to the state's education funding system are needed, *in this moment*, directly after a global pandemic and in the wake of federal disruptions and funding uncertainty, **we caution against attempting too much change, too quickly**. Implementing large-scale changes to our governance structures whose benefits are not supported by research or Vermont evidence— while at the same time undertaking a complete restructuring of the state's education funding system— could further destabilize our education system and negatively impact students and communities.

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