



Rural School Community Alliance

Guiding Principles and Recommendations for an Education Transformation

April 8th, 2025

Testimony Senate Education

Introduction

Margaret MacLean, Educator, Peacham

Lifelong educator with extensive international, national and Vermont specific experience as a teacher, school principal, state school board member, consultant and nonprofit executive director.

WHO WE ARE: We are Vermont townspeople, educators, parents, grandparents, select board and school board members, school staff and community members who support the power of public schools to enrich the lives of Vermonters.

We have formed the **Vermont Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)** because we are committed to advocating for the value and importance of community public schools for our children and communities and for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future. Our analysis and recommendations are grounded in direct experience with Vermont schools, research and consultation provided by leading rural education experts.

We believe Education Transformation requires a clear shared vision and purpose. Transformation cannot be created from above or imposed from outside. To be successful it can only be developed in partnership with Vermonters. This is a fundamental flaw in the planning for transformation that is currently taking place and the reason why we are here to help and urge caution as you proceed.

The RSCA believes the Vermont Legislature should seek balanced responses to the following question:

How can Vermont provide an excellent public education system that prepares children for success, supports families and thriving communities, and is delivered at a cost hardworking Vermonters can afford?

The Alliance currently is supported by more than 80 towns across the state. Since January 15th, organizations that have joined RSCA through a vote of their Board include school districts, supervisory unions, union districts, select boards, and several early-childhood and parent-teacher groups. New members are joining every week, and we are fielding inquiries daily: organizations in an additional 30 towns are exploring membership.

There are 7 major points we want to make today:

1. **We encourage you to actively engage Vermonters statewide.** Let the Commission for the Future of Public Education in Vermont complete the task it was established to do which was to create a vision for the future supported by Vermonters. Adjust commission membership to be broader based and representative of Vermont.
2. **Use the democratic process in support of change.** Vermonters will support a clear vision for change at the ballot box if it is supported by Vermont-specific evidence. Involve them.
3. **Consider the pace of change.** Over the past 12 years significant change has taken place in school governance. There has been insufficient evaluation of the outcomes. We recommend staged change moving forward with the focus being school funding this year. Our education system has been disrupted due to the pandemic and further destabilization could be counterproductive at this time. It is important to consider the unintended consequences of fast-paced change.
4. **Independently evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of current laws.** What can we learn from the implementation of Act 46, Act 173, Act 127? * Evidence suggests that unified districts have not produced the cost reductions anticipated.
5. **We urge continued use of the multi-district supervisory union governance model,** especially in rural areas.
6. **We can support moving to an education foundation formula** that is grounded in robust research, Vermont-specific evidence and knowledge, and a full commitment to the equity principles articulated by the *Brigham* decision.
7. **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 taxpayers' ability to pay.

The Alliance has created a consensus platform with five guiding principles. I will speak briefly about the 1st three, and then pass to my colleagues to cover the final two principles related to governance and funding.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Guiding Principle: Elementary Schools. Young children should be educated close to home.**

Elementary schools are a fundamental element to a thriving community. Communities with high quality and equitable elementary schools, childcare, preschool programs, afterschool programs and summer programs serve as community hubs and economic drivers. *Accessible* schools are essential for young children in rural areas.

Recommendations:

- **Acknowledge the contribution of Vermont’s community elementary schools of all sizes for their central role in education and their contribution to thriving communities.**

In their 2007 study, *Review of Empirical Evidence about School Size Effects*, Leithwood and Jantzi looked at prior research on 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.

- **Carefully review current discussions and proposals concerning minimum class sizes.**

The intended purpose for and outcome of proposed minimum class sizes is unclear. We can guess they may be helpful to provide staffing targets for core teacher numbers, but:

- The numbers vary by grade and do not align with how most Vermont schools are structured K-6 and K-8.
- In rural schools, cohorts of students tend to advance with little variability; therefore, in a single school, it is not practical to have (as in H.454) a minimum that increases from one grade to the next.
- Targets for core staffing could be useful as a reference for planning by school principals. But flexibility is key in grade grouping and staffing.
- We suggest using 3-year rolling averages of total school enrollment divided by the number of core teachers.

Are the proposed minimum class sizes a metric to determine unsustainable schools and target them for closure?

- School principals regularly monitor enrollment trends. Unsustainability is complex, beyond one or more groups of students being under enrolled over a two-year period. Metrics for unsustainable schools would need to be comprehensive. School quality, per pupil costs, sustainability planning and the census of 1- 4-year-olds anticipated plus additional metrics would provide a comprehensive picture for communities considering decisions on school closure to consider.

- **Support schools facing enrollment decline.** The AOE should provide resources to districts responding to enrollment decline in schools of all sizes. A multiage philosophy has historically been a successful approach in Vermont schools; it is developmentally appropriate for young

children. The AOE, supported by a cadre of Vermont practitioners with experience in multiage settings, could provide technical assistance for schools that, due to enrollment decline, wish to implement a mix of grade level and multiage classrooms.

- **Support community schools with unsustainable enrollment.** Future planning is essential for schools. School communities must investigate new options if projected enrollment approaches unsustainable levels. Proactive planning should be encouraged. Declining enrollment should trigger facilitation support from the Agency of Education to develop Education Sustainability Plans. The planning should explore potential changes including collaboration with neighbors, and repurposing as childcare, preschool, and K-2 or K-4 settings. Developed with community involvement and approved by the school board, this approach could help communities be proactive in the face of enrollment decline. We need proactive responses. This is not the time to abandon communities; it is the time to help them reinvent and emerge stronger.
- **Community hubs should surround elementary education in communities of all sizes.** Encourage multi-agency, community and school district collaboration to ensure childcare, preschool, afterschool and summer programs are coordinated and enhance early learning systems. Community hubs drive economic development, and already exist in some communities, illustrating their potential around the state.

2. **Guiding Principle: Middle and high school students may benefit from larger regional schools.**

Viable PK-8 settings offer sustainable programs for students around Vermont, as do specific middle school and 7-12 programs. Regional Technical Centers play an important role in preparing students for their future. In geographically isolated areas without comprehensive regional high schools, PK-12 schools can harness the power of community and provide excellent individualized learning experiences. Older students tend to be able to travel longer distances, are ready developmentally to thrive amidst larger peer groups, and can take advantage of increased program choices and expanded extracurricular activities.

Recommendations:

- **Convene regional conversations regarding secondary education to develop plans which build on current strengths.** What is the vision for secondary education in Vermont? Currently we have a mix of approaches with different configurations of schools. While we have clear standards and expectations for students we don't approach meeting them in the same way. Local flexibility to meet clear standards and reach goals is important. Equity and equality are not the same. We do not need to promote uniformity to meet clear expectations around quality and cost.
- **Call for collaborative solutions, not imposed remedies for ill-defined problems.** Collaboration which taps into the hopes and dreams of Vermonters for their children can result in practical achievable plans. Each SU/SD within a career technical center (CTE) region should convene educators, community members, school board members and youth to develop a robust and practical plan for secondary education between existing schools, communities and career technical centers. Innovative opportunities should be considered; for example, the use of smaller facilities as specialist academies in areas like the Arts or Sciences. Facilitation in plan development should be provided. The final document which would phase in change over time should be adopted by school boards and voted on by communities in the region prior to implementation.

3. **Guiding Principle: Closing schools does not fix Vermont's problems - it can create damaging new ones.** While we acknowledge unsustainable schools need to develop plans for alternative education opportunities, we have a choice as a state regarding how we approach school closure.

Research background:

- **Closing schools is damaging to children.** Studies of school closures show that students:
 - Experience a loss of connectedness with peers and community.
 - Face increased mental health challenges.
 - In the short term, have lower test scores, and more behavioral issues.
 - Face negative impacts from declining family and community engagement.
- **Closing schools impacts equity.** Research finds that students experiencing poverty, students of color, and those with special needs are most negatively impacted by school closures.
- **School closure increases absenteeism and truancy rates among students.** Both increased absenteeism and truancy rates have been documented nationally due to school closure. Principals of schools receiving students from closed schools indicate a higher percentage of absenteeism and truancy along with lack of participation in after school activities and decreased parental involvement. Vermont is not an exception to national trends; consideration of these real impacts is essential.
- **Closing schools does not necessarily save money.** Children from closed schools need an education. National research shows that per pupil spending tends to increase post-closure, while anticipated cost efficiencies from “economies of scale” rarely materialize. School closures generally only demonstrate savings if they are accompanied by significant staff layoffs. Transportation costs increase, wider opportunities promised cost money, and empty public buildings need to be maintained. School closures tend to result in the redistribution of where money is spent, rather than direct financial savings.
- **Closing schools negatively impacts communities.** In communities where schools are closed, research points to depopulation, declining home values, eroding social capital, and problems with attracting and retaining families with children.

Recommendations:

- **Clarify geographic isolation.** Clearly articulated geographic isolation criteria based on population density, square mileage town to town and maximum length of bus rides scaled by age can designate geographically isolated towns with recognition as “essential” rural schools.
- **Recognize that closing schools without due process has consequences.** Only an inclusive open-minded analysis of the pros and cons of closure results in a decision that is supported by the majority of voters. Sufficient time to clarify a path forward, and plan for the future, can mitigate some of the consequences of closure. We recommend you consider H180 as a starting point.

- **It is possible to close a school with community support; Vermont has a long history of doing so.** We recommend that legislators take testimony on this topic from Mara Tieken of Bates College, John Castle VREC, principals, teachers and additional RSCA community members.
- **Maintain flexibility for non-operating school districts.** Vermont’s low-population regions include many communities that do not operate their own schools due to past school closures. Families in these areas often travel long distances for their children’s education, with their options influenced by employment, transportation, and regional access.
 - School closures in neighboring communities could significantly increase travel burdens for families in non-operating districts.
 - Vermont must carefully assess the risk of creating education deserts before making decisions that could impact non-operating communities.
 - Non-operating districts should retain the flexibility of school choice for their students within the parameters defined by the state.
 - Interstate exemptions should be included to accommodate students who may need to attend schools across state lines due to geographic constraints.

Clear and achievable goals for the improvement of equitable and accessible education across Vermont should be established *prior* to consideration of number and type of districts, supervisory unions, and other centralized service structures.

*Note

The last report to the legislature on Act 46 from 2020 only contained anecdotal information from seven of the 111 school districts impacted by the law and was not released until 2024.