

**Vermont Senate
Senate/House Education Committees**

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

My name is Jamie Kinnarney and I serve 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. I am now in the midst of my sixth year as Superintendent of Schools at WRVSU, and previously served as Principal for seven years at the Williamstown schools. This marks my fifteenth year as an education administrator in Vermont.

I want to thank both the Senate/House Education Committees for allowing me the opportunity to testify today on Act 73.

To provide context, the supervisory union that I serve, 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 also want to thank the Senate Education Committee for your work to visit schools, supervisory districts, and supervisory unions across the state over the past several months to learn in person about the wonderful programming, student achievement, and creative problem-solving that is occurring throughout our school system to best serve our students, families, and communities.

In addition, I want to thank you for your continued consideration and support of the supervisory union structure as a viable governance structure for Vermont's schools.

I want to be clear that I agree and support the intent of Act 73 which states, *"To ensure each student is provided substantially equal educational opportunities that will prepare them to thrive in a 21st-century world, it is the intent of the General Assembly to work strategically, intentionally, and thoughtfully to ensure that each incremental change made to Vermont's public education system provides strength and support to its only constitutionally required governmental service."*

Therefore, I come to you today to advocate that we ensure that the next steps we take are **strategic, intentional, thoughtful, and measured**; in order to make certain that unintended consequences do not result in a detriment to our students, or the future of our rural towns and greater state. To this end, I support many of the steps outlined in the Redistricting Task Force Report submitted to the legislature. I would also articulate the willingness of the school system to work collaboratively to find voluntary mergers in order to create better economies of scale at the supervisory union and supervisory district levels. I haven't spoken with anyone in the educational system or a constituent that I serve, who believes that we need fifty-two (52) SUs and SDs to deliver high-quality and fiscally responsible education, but the means of how to address this is where I have grave concerns with Act 73.

There is strong evidence that voluntary approaches to creating collaborative systems, and even voluntary mergers, can create cost savings and improve educational outcomes in some situations. Cooperative alliances that facilitate cost-savings and improve systems while still retaining deep local roots make sense. This position statement supports a voluntary process by which collaborative efforts can achieve the outcomes of improved education for students at reasonable costs. Based on clear goals and expectations laid out by the state.

The WRVSU for instance has already met with three different neighboring school district and Supervisory District Boards to discuss potential voluntary mergers by expanding the supervisory union and submitted the following proclamation to the Act 73 Map Drawing Task Force, ***The White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU), being composed of the member districts of Granville/Hancock, Rochester/Stockbridge, White River Unified, First Branch, Sharon, and Strafford are committed to remaining a Supervisory Union, within a larger governance region to the extent practical, under the terms of Act 73 of 2025. The WRVSU will reach out to contiguous school districts and supervisory unions to explore combining into a larger supervisory union. Our purpose is to continue to optimize cost savings and efficiencies where possible while maintaining local democratic engagement, community voice, oversight, and accountability, in order to achieve excellent educational outcomes for the children and youth in our communities at a cost Vermonters can afford.***

I share this as evidence that school Boards and educational leaders are taking the steps already to create researched, sensible, and local democratic decisions on how best to meet the intent of Act 73. Included in public comment to the task force are letters from Boards representing 100 towns detailing the public process they are engaging in, declarations of their willingness to work collaboratively with their neighbors to discuss voluntary mergers, and support for moving forward in supervisory unions that are configured differently over time, similar to the letter submitted by WRVSU.

I support this approach based on personal experience navigating the aforementioned mergers that occurred within the WRVSU.

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	\$13,947

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. In fact, five out of the six districts within the WRVSU spend less than the state average in per pupil spending (FY26).

I am completely supportive of a change in the education funding formula and believe that our current funding formula consists of too many variables in order to provide predictable tax rates year-to-year due to the complexity and significant number of variables that play a role in the finalized residential tax rate. To this end, I believe that the legislature should continue to study, analyze, and work to fix the funding formula with increased research and attention to the foundation formula.

The important aspect of this work is that it needs to have accountability measures built within it, but not in a way that immediately results in the shuttering of schools or the need to balance weights across incredibly large districts in rural areas, in order for it to work effectively to educate our students. That's the current issue we are dealing with, as we are faced with the need to create much larger forced merged school districts in order to comply within the current foundation formula framework of Act 73. That has been stated as the means for why school districts must become larger; well, that to me means that there is a flaw in the foundation formula to begin with. The solution shouldn't be that we need to utilize a district that has a greater need for increased weights simply for it to equalize out with a less needy or affluent high spending district. That approach is contrary to the work of creating an equitable system. Therefore, as aforementioned, I recommend a great deal more research occur on how best to approach this change to the funding system. The funding formula should match the education system supported by Vermonters rather than drive the shape of the education system for the future. Act 73 got it right to decide on governance first and then create a funding formula that is a match for the system on the ground.

I believe that the School Redistricting Task Force has provided a Road Map to address some of the cost drivers to the education delivery system, and provided reasoning for why a top-down approach to redistricting could cause more harm than good for our education system, and for the future of our great state. Vermont is rooted in the importance of local democracy and with it the oversight and accountability measures that local democracy brings.

To this end, I would recommend that you look to **require SU and SD Boards to enter into Cooperative Educational Service Areas with a special focus on addressing the Special Education Delivery Service Model across our State with a date to be determined this session**. The AOE Special Education Delivery Service Model report of September 26th, 2025, clearly speaks to the fact that we have a reactionary system that *relies too heavily on out-of-district placements and expensive adaptations within inclusive classrooms*. It is clear that we aren't realizing an appropriate return on our investments. Therefore, this is an area that needs greater oversight and accountability specific to personalized student growth, close monitoring of extraordinary spending, delivery model oversight specific to providers to Child Count, and stronger coordination of specialized transportation services.

To address the specific concerns related to the duplication of efforts and inefficiency of fifty-two (52) Supervisory Unions/Supervisory Districts, **I would suggest that all SUs and SDs be required to explore voluntary mergers that result in greater efficiencies and an increase in the number of students served. These voluntary mergers need to be presented to the State Board of Education for consideration/approval for voluntary merger, with a date to be determined this legislative session**. This would result in the reduction of redundancy at the supervisory union/district level without necessarily requiring loss of local democratic control/oversight because the Supervisory Union model of governance could be enacted voluntarily by any/all Boards. If failure to comply with this voluntary process were to occur, then, consistent with current law, the State Board of Education could take action to enlarge an existing supervisory union. These steps provide the ability to continue voluntary conversations that have already been occurring while ensuring that we reduce from our current model of fifty-two (52) SUs/SDs.

Why the focus on the SU/SD governance model now instead of school district forced consolidation?

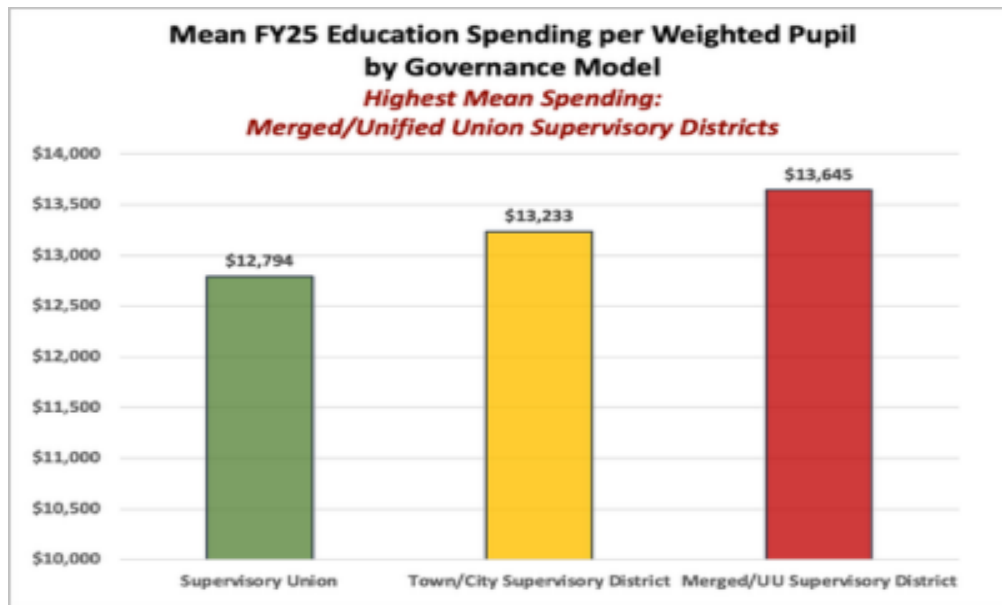


Chart by the Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA) based on Vermont Agency of Education data.

A. Fully analyze different governance models in Vermont and ground decisions in this analysis. In order to make informed decisions about potential new district organizational structures, it is critically important to understand how Vermont's governance structures are actually functioning, rather than relying on assumptions about savings from consolidation or scale that may not be accurate. For example, the chart above shows that merged supervisory districts have the highest average per pupil spending, while the multi-district supervisory unions have the lowest. Data such as these should be a starting point for further analysis, evaluation, and decision-making.

B. 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 Vermont-specific, evidence-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 at the school district level.

- 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.

C. Strengthen effective local governance. Participatory democracy is not just a valued tradition in 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.

- Creating overly large governance units creates distance between local taxpayers and the schools that serve the community’s children.

D. School Boards play a vital role in supporting schools, solving problems, and ensuring local effectiveness. Local school boards provide oversight and accountability. As the only directly elected members of our education system, their connection to communities and voters is vital. They provide a locally informed and essential check and balance for the system.

- 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.

The Education Accountability System must include benchmarks for increased academic growth year-over-year, per pupil spending oversight via the implementation of requiring school districts to comply with an excess cost spending threshold (if the foundation formula isn’t implemented), and continuation of the implementation of minimum class sizes as guidelines for staffing. Failure to meet annual accountability measures should result in technical assistance from the Agency of Education that includes School Boards providing annual progress monitoring benchmarks that indicate transparency, strategic planning, and SU/SD leadership accountability standards that are aligned to

Superintendent annual evaluation processes. It is critical that we are transparent with our communities on the state of our schools, and make certain that continuous improvement is a transparent system to the end of implementing high-quality school improvement.

Create accountability measures to combat cost drivers that hold school districts accountable for delivering on a comprehensive system of supports and an early intervention system that is fully operational and implemented with fidelity. With special attention to Child Find numbers related to Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and Other Health Impairment, as examples of some measures that could be used to monitor implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) throughout our SUs and SDs.

Create a plan of stability and sustainability that looks at the broader picture of an interconnected framework that brings together in partnership the Department of Health and Human Services with the Agency of Education that focuses on preventative and proactive models of student support instead of reactionary measures that result in increased spending due to significant inefficiencies and lack of collaboration across service providers. This interconnected framework should be implemented and supported at the state level to facilitate and speed up the work that is occurring locally.

**Organize these structures in alignment with the newly configured Cooperative Educational Services Areas.*

Implement school accountability visits that result in site visits by experts across the field and supported by the Agency of Education to progress monitor continuous improvement; but to also support with technical assistance in the areas of academic/social and emotional growth, fiscal sustainability (measures dependent on funding formula), student support services (special education/early intervention metrics via MTSS), declining enrollment, etc. These visits would happen every five years, with more immediate technical support if annual benchmarks are not met.

I want to conclude by indicating that I'm in agreement that something needs to occur in order to alleviate property tax pressures, increase student achievement and social emotional growth, and assure increased accountability and efficiency across our educational system. The proof, though, is going to be in the pudding; and therefore, I suggest that we need to pause, analyze the parts of Act 73 that provide a road map to reaching the intent of the legislation, and adjust the parts of the legislation that are creating barriers to reaching the intent. I hope that some of the aforementioned suggestions and thoughts regarding Act 73 assist you with this critically important task.

I also want to remind all of you 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 Rural Community School work. I am a product of those efforts, and that personalization is why I'm 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 educational transformation plan moving forward that doesn't allow for any of our students to fall through the cracks, ensures a personalized education, and delivers on the solid and commendable intent of Act 73. There is a way to move forward that will result in education transformation, but a top-down approach to forcing school district consolidation through the drawing of maps doesn't provide for local democracy to be at the forefront of the solutions, nor provide a road map for a majority of Vermonters to support.

I believe Vermonters understand common sense solutions, the power of local democracy to solve difficult situations, and have asked for and need a more transparent educational funding system, not a top-down mandate.

The good news is that there is still time to implement changes to Act 73 that will increase fiscal responsibility, preserve local democracy, increase school accountability, and result in increased student achievement and social/emotional growth.

Our students' futures and our state's viability moving forward are counting on it!

Respectfully submitted,

Jamie Kinnarney, Superintendent of Schools, WRVSU

