

Good afternoon members of the Senate Education Committee and House Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer my thoughts on the work of your Committees and the Legislature this spring. I am Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of Mountain Views Supervisory Union. We are a district of seven communities including the towns of Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Pittsfield, Pomfret, Reading and Woodstock, with just over 1000 students.

You asked me to speak to three topics regarding the future of Public Education in Vermont. As a “transplant” to the Green Mountain State, I pursued the opportunity to work as an educator in Vermont more than 30 years ago. This State then had a reputation for a progressive educational philosophy and a commitment to meeting the needs of all children. I have remained here as a special education teacher, building based administrator, Special Education Director, and for the last seven years, Superintendent because that vision has been a reality for me. I have always felt that Vermont provides the space for inspired educators and the potential for creative responses to challenging needs. I hope that my varied experiences and belief in the Vermont Public Education system allows me to offer an informed opinion.

First you asked me to speak to the work of the School District Redistricting Task Force and their report. The charge of this group was to examine statewide consolidation options and propose new district configurations intended to improve equity, quality, and fiscal sustainability. This was a herculean task with limited time and State data. I value the intellectual curiosity of this group of Legislators and experienced Vermont public educators as they fully dedicated themselves to the task. They demonstrated a fierce commitment to finding a path forward by designing a plan with three strategies that embraced the context of education in Vermont, the need for greater equity of educational experiences, and the opportunity to be more efficient in delivery of programs.

Of the Task Force’s three strategies, I have experience in achieving a voluntary merger, and have labored to create a Comprehensive High School in our community. However, I believe that I can best speak to the value of Cooperative Education Service Areas (CESA). As one of the Superintendents who shepherded the concept of CESAs for Vermont, I have direct knowledge of the benefits they can offer to our students, educators and financial bottom lines. While I do not believe that CESAs can address all of the educational challenges we are facing, they are a vehicle that provides the scale and scope to access more affordable resources and maintain the direct knowledge of individual communities’ needs. Eight Southeast Supervisory Unions/Districts have already benefited from this model through:

- Responsive special education evaluation teams
- Staffing solutions for hard-to-fill positions
- Comprehensive program reviews to support continuous improvement in special education services and instructional practices.
- Targeted consultation services tailored to district-identified needs.
- High-quality, responsive professional development focused on building instructional and organizational capacity across both general and special education.
- Cooperative purchasing initiatives that increase efficiency and reduce costs for member districts.

Cooperative Education Service Agencies are designed to meet the specific challenges and opportunities of a region, and are only limited in scope by the creativity of its members. It is my recommendation to implement the School District Redistricting Task Force's phased roadmap that offers strategies which are research based and data driven.

The Vermont State Legislature has been a partner with school leadership in providing quality educational experiences for our children and attending to the financial challenges we are facing. House 630, which brought us the opportunity for CESA, has been a significant piece of legislation positively impacting student outcomes and financial efficiencies. The same can be said of Act 73. This legislation codified some of the challenges of educating students in Vermont and put steps in place to begin the work to address them.

For me, the valuable components of this document include minimum class sizes and grade requirements that recognizes that the quality of student experience and financial efficiencies coexist, a path forward to access School Construction Aid, an attempt to achieve a state wide calendar and graduation requirements, and a goal of a Foundations Formula to address equitability of school funding.

The Foundation Formula was presented as a means to achieve equitable funding for students so that an individual's zip code did not dictate the quality of the education they receive. In essence, it provides districts the same dollars per student. The reality of this method is that districts that are more efficacious can direct more dollars directly to each student. Districts that are less effective will deliver fewer dollars directly to each student. I believe that until we elevate the root causes of inequity of educational experiences, and address those specifically in Legislation, we will continue to maintain this pattern of varied student outcomes and experiences.

Here is what I would like to see further addressed regarding the Funding Formula:

- Provide evidence for the implementation of this methodology by offering measurable positive impacts on schools, students, and taxpayers
- Analyze impacts across district sizes, demographics, and regions before making changes to the funding structures
- Ensure that formula accounts for the integration of both academic and CTE pathways, so that neither is disadvantaged and students have access

These assurances would provide community members and educators the documentation they need to trust the intent of Legislators to create a more equitable educational funding system using this strategy. Again, equal funding per student per district is not the same as equitable funding for Vermont students.

The nineteen pages of Act 73 that outline a process to access School Construction Aid was a relief for my District. We finally had a template for addressing the urgent situation of Woodstock Union Middle and High Schools' failing facility. My asks for future Legislative action on School Construction Aid are few but significant. First, fully execute the requirements of Act 73 with regards to State Aid for School Construction by identifying a funding source. A firm commitment for school construction aid is essential for schools, school districts and a successful implementation

of Act 73 overall. Making that commitment would engender trust, while not making a firm commitment achieves the opposite.

And just as urgently, pass legislation drafted by Representative Kimbell and Senator Clark to exclude capital construction costs from the definition of “education spending” for the purposes of calculating excess spending. Building needs across the State will not be addressed at the cost of educational programs.

I support the work of our Legislators to reduce the number of School Districts and Supervisory Unions in Vermont. Opportunities for future work by the House and Senate to address this need would include creating measures of success for the stated goals of Act 73; equity and cost efficiency, not arbitrary student counts. I would ask that the message that redistricting will not singularly control tax increases is critical, and that it will in fact lead to short-term cost increases. Critically, the drivers of significant cost increases; health care, mental health, staffing, and facilities, must be solved. Further, revise the timeline for execution so the work is evidence based and meets the Act 73 intended goals. Finally, provide districts—not just AOE—with transition resources. The requirements of Act 73 are not merely turning on or off a switch, or drawing some lines on a map. The work is deep and meaningful, and requires financial resources from the State to achieve.

I would argue, and have the evidence to support, that excellence of educational opportunities has been achieved at MVSD for the majority of our students as the result of becoming a Supervisory District. As a faculty member and administrator, I sat in too many meetings where I saw the stagnation of student outcomes. It didn’t matter what instructional or curricular direction we took, the lack of a clear districtwide vision, that had the infrastructure to be implemented, was needed to move forward.

This all changed when the towns of our Supervisory Union made the brave decision to become a Supervisory District. This merge allowed us to realize a:

- Unified contract
- Unified curriculum
- Unified Strategic Plan, Portrait of a Graduate, and Educational Policies
- Unified instructional practices
- Unified Board that allowed the Superintendent to serve as an Instructional Leader
- Unified budget that supports the stated priorities of the Strategic Plan
- Unified faculty and staff who are knowledgeable of the District priorities

In my experience, the term unified is synonymous with the terms opportunity, efficiency and effectiveness.

This was not an easy process. For MVSD, this meant 25 three hour meetings and multiple town votes when our towns already shared a high school and the communities were integrated. Loss of Board control was a primary concern for our eight Boards and their citizens. These fears have not been realized due to the work of the merged Board which has resulted in impressive growth in student outcomes and improved faculty retention. This merge did not close schools but it did allow

us to reimagine instructional spaces that better reflected our Portrait of a Graduate. This new MVSD Board had many growing pains however they were eventually recognized as the School Board of the Year. The eighteen School Board members now have a broader vision of the District, and confidence in the capacity of the Leadership Team

Once we became a merged district, the schools and educators benefited from a clear, coherent message of our purpose, and a learning culture based on reflective practices. We created a Portrait of a Graduate where the community, students and educators identified the valued attributes of our future graduates. Two 5 year strategic plans were written based on a needs assessment that brought together parents, students, educators and administrators to identify the short and long term goals for the District. Our Leadership Team wrote and the Board approved a Teaching and Learning Policy that codified the work of the District and Board.

Decisions were made at the District level to direct Covid Federal Dollars to improving literacy, math and the social/emotional health of our students. Professional development started at the classroom level with a small cohort of teachers. Student success created teacher momentum for change. The District hired, with the merged Board support, a Districtwide Curriculum Coordinator and Facilitators for Literacy and Math Instruction. These content area experts created frameworks for districtwide work, aligned curriculum, instruction and assessment (Act 173), deepened Multi Levels of Support attending to all three Tiers, outlined professional development cycles, developed systems for student and teacher accountability, provided teacher team and individual instruction, coaching and modeling, and supported Principals as Instructional Leaders. Further, the MVSU Leadership Team dedicated themselves to continuous improvement through data cycles and national professional learning. They also visited high performing schools across the country.

None of this could have happened as an Supervisory Union with 8 separate districts and Boards. Only as a Supervisory District could all of our students achieve this level of success. Superintendents cannot act as Instructional Leaders when serving the needs of multiple boards.

In summary, the Legislature has an opportunity to respond to the expectations of our communities and the responsibility to educate our children if we attend directly to those factors most impacting our mission. In my testimony, I have highlighted the work I am most proud of as a Superintendent that has helped to create a vibrant and agentic learning environment for the students of MVSD. I have seen how collaboration of school leaders through Cooperative Education Service Agencies does make a difference for student services and financial efficiencies. I value the work of Act 73 to address class size, create statewide systems, support a path for new and renovated school facilities, and to establish a more fair and transparent funding system. I am fully committed to Superintendents focusing on the role of Instructional Leaders rather than attending to the expectations of multiple Boards by becoming School Districts instead of Supervisory Unions.

I would also ask that the reflective practices in place at MVSD also be considered by Vermont Legislators by considering these three questions in all contexts.

- Does our work create more equitable educational experiences?
- Is the work supported by evidence?

- Does it expand opportunities for and produce measurable positive impacts on student learning?

I know that these three questions are the compass points for creating a vision for Vermont Education that will build on its reputation for having a progressive educational philosophy and a commitment to meeting the needs of all children.