

**Vermont Senate
Senate Finance Committee**

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 the Senate Finance Committee for allowing me the opportunity to testify today on S.220.

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 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.

Hence, my recommendation is that you focus our efforts on transforming our educational system through the strongly researched policies previously provided to you via the use of the **Cooperative Educational Service Areas**, and by requesting all SUs or SDs work cooperatively and collaboratively to partner through voluntary school governance restructuring as already provided under current law (**with an actionable deadline to be determined this legislative session**).

I am confident that this approach would ensure necessary safeguards are in place so Vermont's students do not fall through the cracks or get lost in any of our education transformation efforts. We need to provide stability and predictability to our ever changing education system.

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 elements 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 funding 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.

As aforementioned, 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.

The work to implement **Cooperative Educational Service Areas** will take time as we transition to a regional approach to address some of our cost drivers, and time is of the utmost importance as we look to address rising property taxes and decrease the percentage increase of year-over-year spending. Hence, this is where I see **S.220** playing a role in providing a temporary tool to address FY28 spending, while we work together to implement the phases of the Cooperative Educational Service Areas as provided as a Roadmap from the Redistricting Task Force, look for further efficiencies via voluntary mergers at the SU and SD level of governance, and conduct thorough research in order to make certain that any change to the education funding formula doesn't result in unattended consequences.

I want to be clear that I see a spending cap as only a tool that should be used on a transitional basis, and needs to assure school districts that it provides for safeguards in order to address things like decreased weights, percentage drop in LTWADM, impacts on per pupil spending on things that are out of a district's control like health insurance premiums (that are bargained state-wide).

I would also ask that your committee look to examine whether it makes the most sense to cap per pupil spending, or if Act 68 spending makes more sense based on it taking out some of the unpredictable variables that come into play regarding student weights. As has been previously stated by members of the educational field, data integrity has and continues to be a major concern. Hence, why the approach to looking at Act 68 spending may make more sense (Education Spending - Local Revenue).

I would also ask that any cap on spending also be aligned directly with announced elementary and secondary tuitions for all public and private schools. We can't place a cap on spending per pupil for a district that is non-operating or has non-operating grades, and allow for districts to increase their announced tuition beyond that % of the spending cap.

I also want to urge your committee to make certain that we have some type of transitional method in place to deal with a district that loses pupils in the event that a per pupil spending cap is put into place via S.220. I currently have one of my districts that has a Board approved budget of an increase of only 0.80% (\$73,159) in increased expenditures for FY27 but their per pupil spending is up 9.28% as compared to that Act 68 spending (Ed. Fund) which is down \$43,112 for FY 27. Meaning they would need to significantly cut programming for students in order to comply with a per pupil spending cap due primarily to a decrease in ADM at the PreK level, and a drop in weights due to a decrease in Free and Reduced lunch rate % given changes to direct certification via medicaid qualification.

Hence, I'm open-minded and supportive of a transitional tool like S.220, but caution that we need to take all of the aforementioned factors into account prior to passing final legislation.

I want to conclude by indicating that I am in agreement that something needs to occur in order to alleviate property tax pressures, increase student achievement and social emotional growth, as well as increase accountability and efficiency across Vermont's educational system. I don't believe time spent on mapping is going to get you to a place that will actually address those aforementioned concerns that need immediate attention. I think you need to 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 would also call on you to look at S.220 in combination with the implementation of **CESAs, voluntary mergers at the Supervisory Union/Supervisory Districts, and implementation of a revised funding formula as important next steps in reaching your admirable goals.**

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 via legislation 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