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**Vermont Senate Finance Committee
February 21, 2025**

***Testimony Presented by
Michael G Leichter, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Harwood Unified Union School District***

Chair Cummings and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Mike Leichter. I currently serve as the Superintendent of the Harwood Unified Union School District in Washington County. I have over 34 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in both Vermont and Pennsylvania including 13 years as a superintendent in a school district of 5400 students.

The impact of the current modeling under consideration would reduce funding for the six towns in Harwood by \$6,300,000. The details of the staffing impact are quite similar to what my colleague Amy Rex shared for Milton. Without adequate consideration of school scale and more extensive planning, modeling, and funding for school construction, a hypothetical Winooski Valley School Board would be faced with monumental challenges for schools in Waterbury, Duxbury and the Mad River Valley in 2028.

In her written testimony, Chelsea Myers addresses questions related to how school facilities, construction costs, and capital expenses would be handled during the consolidation process and if school construction aid will be provided to accommodate scale. For my school district this is of particular concern. Based on questions posed to the administration's consultants on February 20 related to both debt service and capital, I feel it is essential to highlight this area as it relates to the proposed foundation formula base amount.

By way of background, when I was hired in 2022, my experience in school construction was of particular interest to the Harwood school board. During my prior superintendency, I led district efforts to fully renovate 4 elementary schools ranging in student enrollment from 350 students to 650 students, construction of a new elementary school with a maximum capacity of 750 students, and phased construction of a new 390,000 square foot high school with a capacity for 2100 students.

The Harwood Unified Union School District has extensive deferred maintenance in most of its 7 buildings with significant needs at Harwood Union High School in South Duxbury. It is the district estimate that there is \$82,000,000 in deferred maintenance throughout the school district.

Immediately prior to my arrival, a bond proposal by the school board to consolidate middle school students to Crossett Brook Middle School and renovate Harwood Union High School failed by a significant margin.

Additionally, school scale is a serious consideration in future years as the Harwood school board has already reduced 27.5 staff positions for the current school year and will be reducing another 20 positions for the 2025-2026 school year.

The school district has a K-4 elementary building in Waterbury with current enrollment of 300 providing sufficient scale. The remaining four K-6 elementary buildings range in size from 113 to 164 students. Without consideration of building consolidation to realize scale, additional staff reductions which would be necessary in the administration's currently proposed model cannot be achieved without significantly compromising educational quality and programming in the schools.

Earlier this fall the Harwood school board commissioned the district's architectural firm to analyze the current size, enrollment, and maintenance needs of all school district buildings and then to develop various scenarios for reconfiguration options and potential cost savings over a 30 year period.

Every reconfiguration option currently being explored would require some construction of new classroom space to keep classroom sizes under the state maximums for students per classroom. In order to provide equitable educational programming access across the district, additional new construction would be needed at the majority of elementary school campuses that would remain, post-consolidation.

Estimated construction costs for the 13 reconfiguration options explored in HUUSD range from \$43 million at the low end to \$88 million at the high end. This is the same range of estimated costs for the preferred options that the school board's facility committee will recommend to the full school board.

The analysis indicates that there is a direct and largely proportional relationship between *the cost of construction* and *the potential for long-term savings* in these reconfiguration options. Put another way, the options with the highest construction cost also have the highest potential for long term savings.

The reason for this direct relationship between upfront costs and potential long-term savings is intuitive. Put simply, when campuses are closed, the remaining campuses need reconfiguration or expansion (or both) This allows for greater reductions in ongoing operational costs (salary and benefit) in staffing, and also ongoing maintenance costs.

In conclusion, it will require significant investment in our school facilities to realize long term savings in the proposed model currently under consideration without compromising equitable educational access for Harwood students. The total number of schools and total square footage of schools cannot be meaningfully reduced without significant construction.