

Draft 8/26/24

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to make a comment.

My name is Greg Hughes, I am a Friend of Vermont Public Education, and I spent twelve years on the Bethel School Board from 1994 until 2006. I would like to share with you a brief thirty-five-year history of our schools in the White River Valley Supervisory Union.

This SU is geographically large, it is made up of 10 towns and includes parts of Addison, Orange and Windsor Counties. In the early 1990s our schools were full. In Bethel we had a number of temporary classrooms behind the school and the library became classroom space.

In response to the bulge in our school-aged population, legislative changes allowed private schools to help educate these students. The private school in the White River Valley is a good example, they came into existence in 1995 and were able to accept tuition students when other schools were full.

The bulge in our school aged population has long passed. Of the 10 towns in the White River Valley Supervisory Union the four towns that had their own high school all made the painful decision to close their high school. Bethel and South Royalton formed the White River Valley Unified School district, and the consolidation has gone well. However, our schools have additional capacity and with more students the school district would generate more tuition revenue and property taxes would go down.

Given the profound drop in our school aged population, I submit that the legislation passed in the 1990s to help accommodate the bulge is no longer appropriate. As this Commission determines how to reduce the cost of education it is now time to revisit the policy of giving public money to private schools. Times have changed, our school age population has changed, and our legislation should change.

In 2023 the VT Supreme Court confirmed “that the methods appropriate for providing adequate educational opportunity may change over time, as those once sufficient ‘can and should be modified’ if they no longer serve their intended purpose.” (Vitale v BFUHS citing Brigham v. State).

In Vermont’s White River Valley and around the state supporting private schools with public money no longer serves its intended purpose, and if we follow the guidance of the VT Supreme Court the policy of funding private schools with public money can and should be modified.