

Commission on the Future of Public Education in Vermont

Monday, December 2, 2024

Patricia A. Hannaford Career Center, Middlebury

Public Comment: Jeanne Albert

Good afternoon, Commission and community members,

My name is Jeanne Albert. I am a retired mathematics professor and I currently serve as chair of the Lincoln School District Board.

I appreciate the Commission's stated commitment to using data and evidence to guide its decisions and recommendations. I recognize that it has been a challenge to get all the data and information you've identified as critical to your mission, especially given the very tight statutory timeline.

As you've noted, our complex education finance system is comprised of many interwoven threads. Today I want to share some preliminary analysis and comparisons I've done regarding supervisory union (SU) and supervisory district (SD) structure and spending in Vermont. I hope these results will inform your discussions in a useful way.

Using AOE governance types, I classified Vermont's supervisory unions into three categories:

- **Single-town/city SDs**
- **Merged/Unified Union SDs**
- **Unmerged SUs with at least two districts** (which themselves may be merged or unmerged)

I then looked at budgeted spending per equalized (or weighted) pupil for three fiscal years– 2018, 2023, and 2025– and calculated summary statistics for each of the categories.

In the prepared remarks submitted to the Commission, I've included several tables and a chart that displays these and other statistics (see below). In brief:

- **Across all years, merged SDs consistently have the highest spending per pupil (EQP or LTW-ADM);**
- **For FYs 2018 and 2023, spending in unmerged SUs was approximately the same as the average for all SUs/SDs, while for single-town/city SDs spending was considerably below average; and**
- **For FY25, this dynamic is reversed: spending in single-town/city SDs was approximately the same as the average for all SUs/SDs, while spending in unmerged SUs was below average.**

I'm sharing these calculations to provide context for some of the options displayed under **School Size** in the Finance Subcommittee's "brainstorm" spreadsheet. In version 2 (which I believe is the most recent), the "**fiscal impact when fully realized**" of merging schools and districts is appropriately classified as "**unclear**."

Given that merged SDs in Vermont have consistently higher per-pupil spending, on average, than other SU governance structures, it is unwise to recommend creating additional merged entities before gaining a more complete understanding of why this is happening.

For example, a more thorough analysis could identify whether and to what extent additional central office structures in merged supervisory districts contribute to this difference in spending, and could reveal valuable insights about variation of spending across all supervisory structures.

While it may be a reasonable **hypothesis** that merged governance structures facilitate reduced spending compared to other models, the data in Vermont do not support this conclusion.

Crucially, **Table 2: Potential Policy Actions** of the Commission's preliminary draft of its report to the general assembly displays a condensed version of the brainstorm spreadsheet in which the "**unclear**" fiscal impact noted above does not appear. It would be unfortunate if the report to the legislature omits this assessment by the Finance Subcommittee, especially in light of the results I've shared with you here.

As you've acknowledged in your draft report (page 6): "...clear, valid, and accurate data is essential at all levels of the Commission's work. Any eventual policy recommendation will need data during the discussion phase (to determine whether it is a valid recommendation), the analysis phase (to determine and model the impacts of any recommendation), and for ongoing evaluation of success."

I present these results as support for the Commission's commitment to an evidence-based process. Later in these prepared remarks I've also included related Vermont-specific data regarding education spending and school closure.

I'm happy to answer any questions or provide further information. Thank you.

Jeanne Albert, Ph.D.
Lincoln, Vermont
jalbert@middlebury.edu
jalbert@lincolnsd.org

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Education spending by SU/SD type: summary statistics

FY18

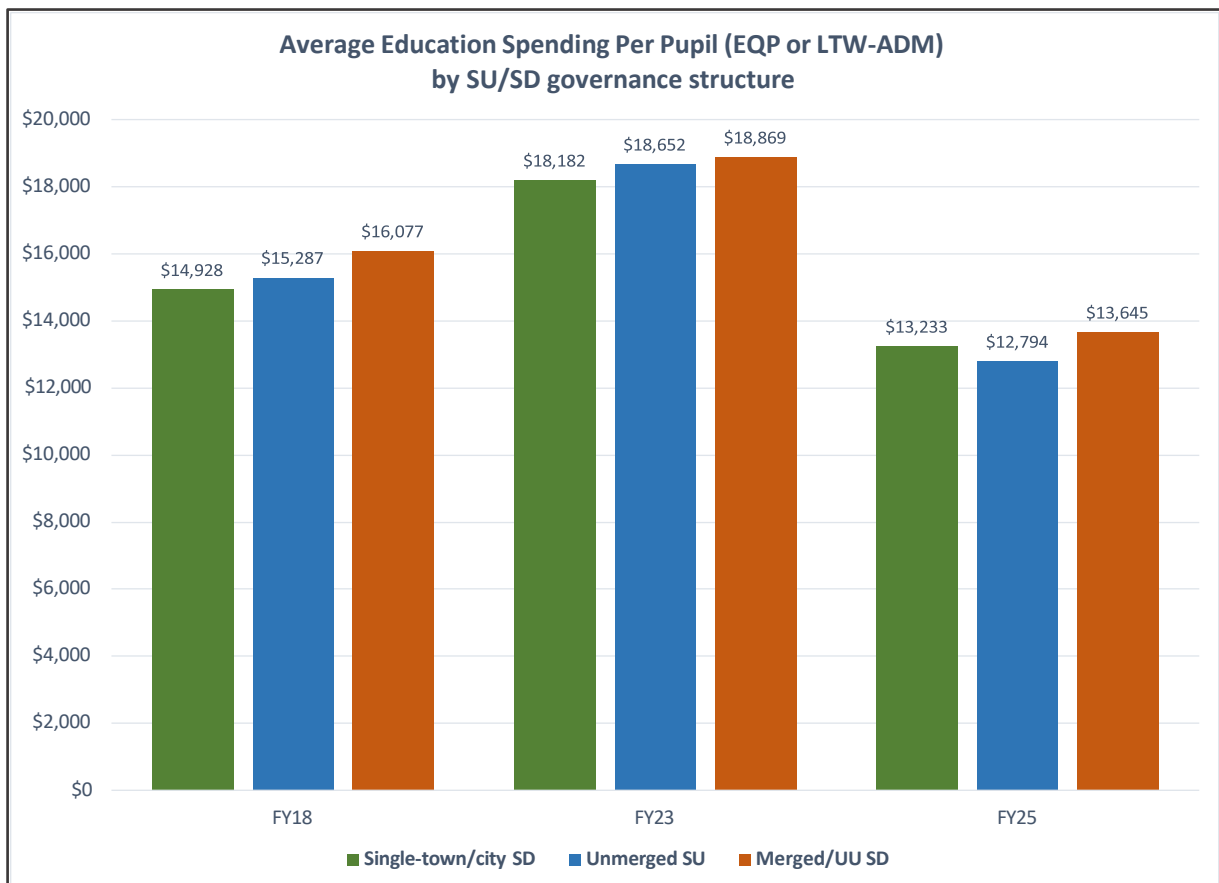
SU/SD category	Number of SUs/SDs	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Total EQP
Single-town/city SD	10	\$13,229	\$16,560	\$14,928	18,426 (21%)
SU with ≥ 2 districts	37	\$12,598	\$18,280	\$15,287	51,961 (59%)
Merged/Unified SD	10	\$15,007	\$18,799	\$16,077	17,358 (20%)
All SUs/SDs	57	\$12,598	\$18,799	\$15,368	87,745

FY23

SU/SD category	Number of SUs/SDs	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Total EQP
Single-town/city SD	9	\$16,456	\$19,829	\$18,182	16,845 (20%)
SU with ≥ 2 districts	25	\$14,623	\$23,024	\$18,652	38,536 (45%)
Merged/Unified SD	17	\$16,252	\$23,749	\$18,869	30,433 (35%)
All SUs/SDs	51	\$14,623	\$23,749	\$18,641	85,814

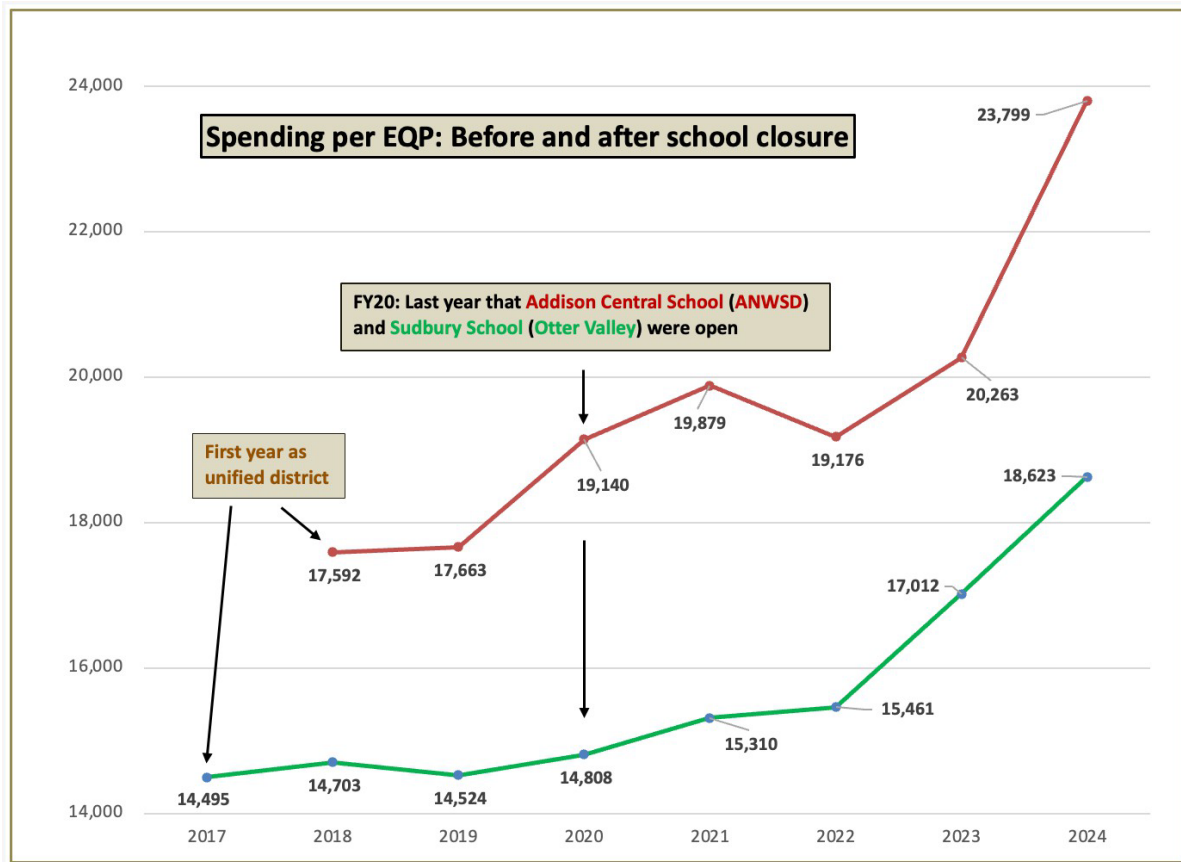
FY25

SU/SD category	Number of SUs/SDs	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Total LTW-ADM
Single-town/city SD	10	\$12,408	\$14,680	\$13,233	28,955 (20%)
SU with ≥ 2 districts	25	\$10,439	\$17,434	\$12,794	65,905 (46%)
Merged/Unified SD	17	\$11,036	\$16,099	\$13,645	47,949 (34%)
All SUs/SDs	52	\$11,036	\$16,099	\$13,169	142,810



Education spending in Merged SDs after school closure

The figure below displays education spending information for the two most recent Vermont examples in which AOE data are available. As indicated in the graph, school closure did not reduce overall spending per EQP in these districts.



Data Sources

(1) Education spending by district: VT AOE Per Pupil Spending Reports, by year

<https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/financial-reports/pupil-spending>

(2) Supervisory Unions/Districts and membership: VT AOE Announced Tuition Reports, by year

<https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/financial-reports/pupil-spending>