

October 9, 2024

Dear Chair Kornheiser and members of the Finance Subcommittee,

We believe the Commission on the Future of Public Education and the Legislature should seek a balanced response to the question: **How can Vermont provide an excellent public education system that prepares children for success, supports families and thriving communities, and is delivered at a cost hardworking Vermonters can afford?**

The following values and recommendations have been written by Vermont educators, parents, and community members who support the power of schools to enrich the lives of Vermonters. Our document is grounded in research [attached] and direct experience with Vermont schools.

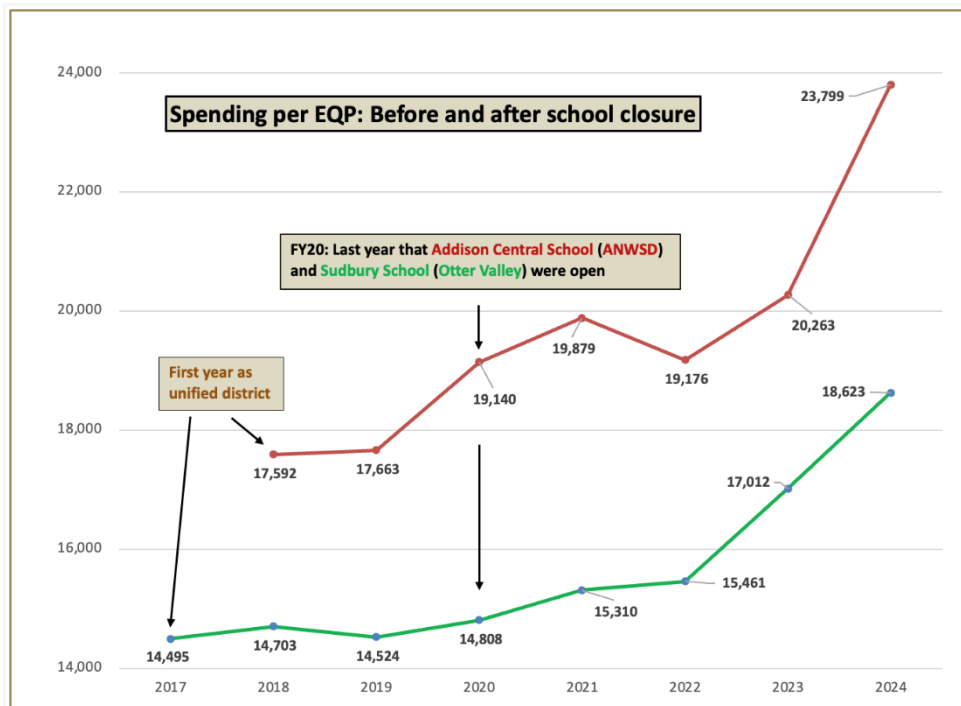
### **Vision of the kinds of schools Vermont needs – community and context matter.**

1. **Young children should be educated close to home.** Communities with high quality and equitable elementary schools, childcare, preschool programs, afterschool programs, and summer programs serve and act as community hubs and economic drivers.
2. **Middle and high school children may benefit from the larger settings regional schools can offer.**
  - The education system in each Vermont community has evolved differently over time. Viable PK-8 settings offer sustainable programs for students around Vermont, as do specific middle school programs and well-established 7-12 settings.
  - In general, older students tend to be able to travel longer distances, are ready developmentally to thrive amidst larger peer groups, and can take advantage of increased program choices and expanded extracurricular activities in larger regional schools.
  - In geographically isolated areas without regional high schools, PK-12 schools can harness the power of community and provide individualized learning experiences that meet student needs and prepare them for the wider world.

### **Closing schools does not fix Vermont's problems—it creates different ones.**

3. **Closing schools is damaging to children.** Studies of school closures show that students:
  - Experience a loss of connectedness with peers and community.
  - Face increased mental health challenges.
  - In the short term, have lower test scores, worse attendance, and behavioral issues.
  - In the long term, are less likely than their peers to complete college and secure a job.
  - Face negative impacts from declining family and community engagement.
4. **Closing schools does not save money.** Children from closed schools need an education. National research shows that per pupil spending tends to increase post-closure, while anticipated cost efficiencies from “economies of scale” rarely materialize. Transportation costs increase, wider opportunities promised cost money, and empty public buildings need to be maintained. School closures most often result in the redistribution of where money is spent rather than financial savings.

This chart provides examples of this phenomenon in Vermont: a continued rise in district spending per equalized pupil, after school closure in a member town.



5. **Closing schools impacts equity.** Research finds that students experiencing poverty, students of color, and those with special needs are most negatively impacted by school closures.
6. **Closing schools negatively impacts communities.** In communities where schools are closed, research points to depopulation, declining home values, eroding social capital, and problems with attracting and retaining families with children.
7. **Closing schools without due process results in unintended consequences.**
  - Only an inclusive open-minded analysis of the pros and cons of closure results in a decision that is supported by the majority of voters. Sufficient time to clarify a path forward, and plan for the future, can avoid unintended consequences. Examples include excessively long bus rides and abandoned school buildings with no clear educational plan for their re-use.
  - This is happening now in the Roxbury/ Montpelier district as Roxbury, a community of 42 square miles – that does not border Montpelier geographically – deals with long bus rides for young children of 2 hours and 15 mins per day and an empty school building with no plan for reuse. A fair and thorough analysis of the issue, the development of a clear plan, and a vote by the community could have avoided these consequences of a school closure decision made too soon. Vermont’s children deserve no less.
8. **Approach school closure with clearly articulated due-process requirements.** If a school becomes unsustainable due to enrollment decline and the district is considering school closure, a clear process should be articulated. Neutral facilitators should be hired to lead a study process involving community members through a comprehensive analysis of the pros and cons of remaining open, repurposing, or closure. Each option should be documented and presented as a choice for communities to vote on. A town vote on school closure is an essential element to ensure due process is attained. It will ensure that the planning process has resulted in comprehensive plans and avoids unintended consequences.
9. **A state policy to close schools based on arbitrary numbers has no educational rationale.** Small schools for elementary students can be exemplary schools. Multiage classrooms are developmentally appropriate settings for young children. Many small schools are cost-effective and among the best performing schools in Vermont. Declining enrollment to the point of unsustainability is the only legitimate educational rationale for closure of schools that otherwise meet state standards and are cost-effective.

## Strategic Policy Opportunities

### 10. Promote community vitality.

- **Schools are a fundamental element to a thriving community.** Education policy should support schools and communities throughout Vermont so they can thrive socially and economically.
- **Support and respect communities facing unsustainable enrollment.** When a school's enrollment declines to the point of unsustainability, schools and their communities should be able to request resources, time, and assistance to develop a comprehensive educational plan for the future.
- **Discourage the scapegoating of small rural communities.** Blaming small rural communities for Vermont's fiscal crisis is inaccurate and not based on a factual analysis of the problem. Scare-mongering around closure undermines stability, especially of staffing, and damages our education system statewide.

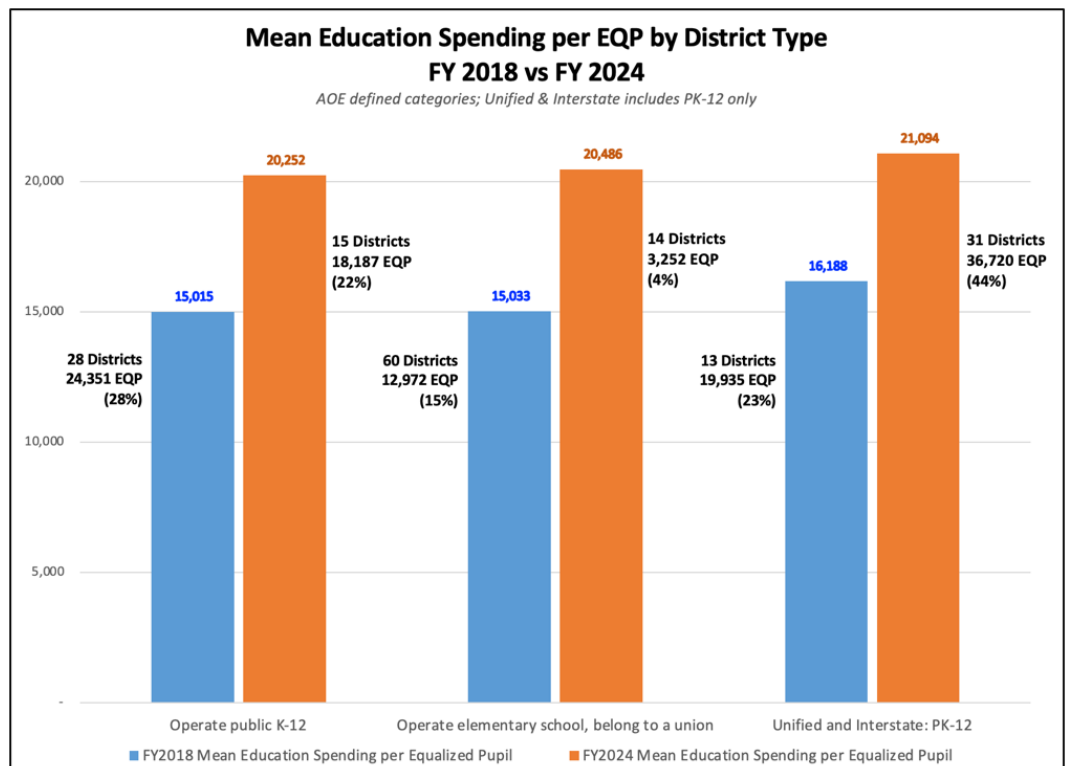
### 11. Analyze the impact of declining enrollment on schools of all sizes.

- Expand the availability of affordable housing. Declining enrollment is evident in communities that are unaffordable for young Vermont families because of the high purchase cost of homes and rentals. Addressing affordable housing statewide is a strategy to help address enrollment decline.
- An analysis could support strategic collaboration between communities at the middle or high school levels to address enrollment decline.
- A number of communities with vibrant, high-performing and cost-effective small schools are attracting young families from across the nation. Vermont should be encouraging in-migration for our excellent education system and not closing schools that are assets to children, families, and communities and have steady, sustainable enrollment.

### 12. Act 46 must be independently evaluated.

- **No savings have been demonstrated.** What have been the consequences of consolidation? Vermont spent \$31 million in tax incentives with the intent to create larger, more efficient districts. What have been the effects on levels of district spending? The last report to the legislature on Act 46 from 2020 only contained anecdotal information from seven of the 111 school districts impacted by the law and was not released until 2024. What can we learn from the implementation of the law?

Evidence suggests that unified districts have not produced the cost reductions anticipated.



- Supervisory unions may be more effective than consolidated district models.  
Act 46 dissolved and combined several supervisory unions into larger entities with independent districts, and in some cases a mix of independent districts and small merged groups; in other cases, the existing supervisory union model stayed intact. Supervisory union models may be more effective than consolidated district models, as they allow for both unified services *and* local decision-making. An evaluation of Act 46 could indicate that this is a model – rather than consolidated districts – to replicate in other areas of the state.
- Larger merged districts appear to have diminished public support for public education.  
On Town Meeting Day 2024, 83% of budgets passed in single-town or city school districts that operate within supervisory unions, whereas only 38% passed in merged districts.

Number of districts whose initial budget vote (March 4 to March 9) passed or failed, by district type				
	Initial Budget Vote Passed	Initial Budget Vote Failed	Total Districts	
Unified District	12	20	32	<b><i>38% of Unified District Budgets Pass (12 of 32)</i></b>
Independent District	54	11	65	<b><i>83% of Independent District Budgets Pass (54 of 65)</i></b>
Total Vote Outcome	66	31	97	<b><i>68% of All District Budgets Pass (66 of 97)</i></b>

*Budget Vote Results (Data from VASBO)*

**Strategies to address current fiscal challenges**

- **Clearly define the problem** prior to deciding solutions.
- **Include effects of covid and inflation.** The impact of covid and inflation on the education system should be factored into any analysis of the current crisis.
- **Require appropriate uses of the Education Fund.** Examine Vermont’s Education Fund and remove items not directly related to the core mission of PK-12 education. Items such as pensions, mental health services, school construction, and dual enrollment should be reviewed for re-allocation to other funding sources rather than increase the burden on property taxes.
- **Control health care costs.** Affordable health care is a state goal. Current levels of increase are unsustainable.
- **Ensure equitable access to mental health services.** All schools need equal access to mental health services. This should not be driving up costs for some school districts due to inequitable access.
- **Increase opportunities for collaboration between districts and SUs,** such as expanded funding for the newly-enacted boards of cooperative education services (BOCES) initiative.
- **Use income, rather than property, to determine education tax rates.** Using income as the basis for education taxes would be more equitable, transparent, and simpler to implement.
- **Expand the availability of affordable housing.** Declining enrollment impacts schools of all sizes. Communities across the state are unaffordable for young Vermont families because of the high purchase cost of homes and rentals.

We recognize the challenge that the finance subcommittee faces, and appreciate your thoughtful, data-driven approach. Thank you for consideration of our suggestions and concerns.

Sincerely, Allen Gilbert, past School Board Chair Worcester, past President VSBA; Cheryl Charles, School Board Chair, Westminster; Jeanne Albert, School Board Chair, Lincoln; David Schoales, past School Board Member, Brattleboro; Margaret MacLean, past employee Rural School and Community Trust, past Executive Director Vermont Rural Education Collaborative, past Member Vermont State Board of Education, Peacham