

Dear Chair Roy and members on the Commission for the Future of Public Education in Vermont,

We believe the Commission 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.

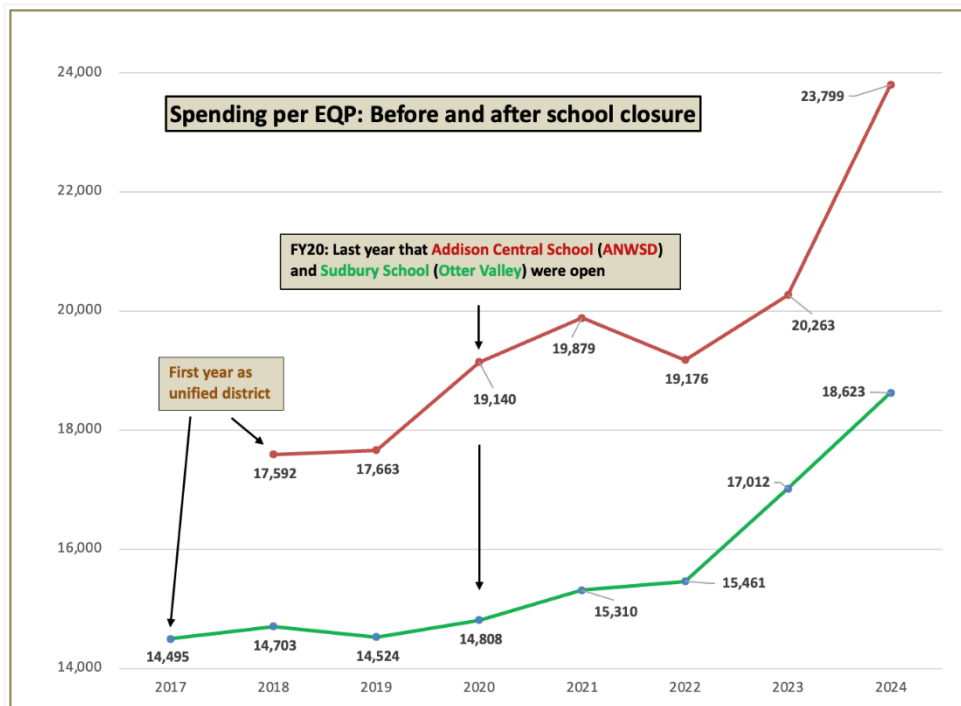
Vision of the kinds of schools Vermont needs – community and context matter.

- 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.**
 - Viable PK-8 settings offer sustainable programs for students around Vermont, as do specific middle school programs and well- established 7-12 settings.
 - Regional Technical Centers play an important role in preparing students for their future.
 - 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.
 - 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. Opportunities exist for collaboration and creative change at the High School level.

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 and their communities 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.

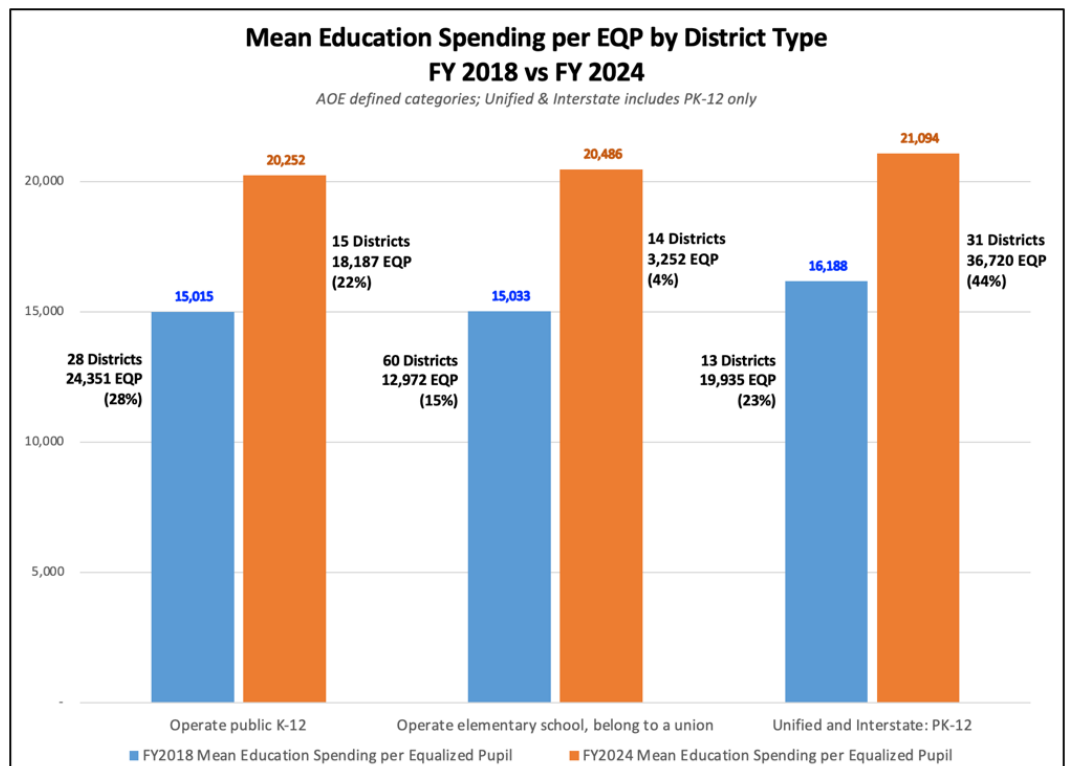
- Expand the availability of affordable housing. Declining enrollment is evident in communities that are unaffordable for young Vermont families because of the high purchase cost of homes and rentals. Addressing affordable housing statewide is a strategy to help address enrollment decline.
- An analysis 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 elementary 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	38% of Unified District Budgets Pass (12 of 32)
Independent District	54	11	65	83% of Independent District Budgets Pass (54 of 65)
Total Vote Outcome	66	31	97	68% of All District Budgets Pass (66 of 97)

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.

Thank you for consideration of our suggestions and concerns.

Research Links

Closing Schools

Revisiting Research on School Closings: Key Learnings for District and Community Leaders:

<https://tinyurl.com/47jh7sse>

The Harm of School Closures Can Last a Lifetime, New Research Shows <https://tinyurl.com/53ezcd92>

Rethinking the School Closure Research: School Closure as Spatial Injustice

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1233167>

What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York <https://tinyurl.com/yretevfy>

Do rural school closures lead to local population decline? <https://tinyurl.com/42kyx934>

Community Schools

Why local leaders should champion “community schools” to improve student, family, and neighborhood well-being <https://tinyurl.com/2572reka>

Top Benefits of Family and Community Engagement <https://tinyurl.com/mpayp9fa>

Belonging Boosts Kids’ Mental Health <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhe4vd>

School Connectedness Helps Students Thrive <https://tinyurl.com/mv3sb7ra>

How Community Schools Make a Difference <https://tinyurl.com/489hcx7z>

Bus Rides

A lot of roads to cover as schools close some kids face longer bus rides

<https://tinyurl.com/4j5br2mw>

Study links longer bus rides to chronic absenteeism <https://tinyurl.com/2s48rcy5>

Long School Bus Rides Stealing the Joy of Childhood<https://tinyurl.com/mr4x2mkj>

Tax Impact

There is more to school tax increases than spending <https://tinyurl.com/ycymv5bx>

Sincerely

1. Allen Gilbert, former School Board Chair Worcester, former President VSBA, Worcester
2. Cheryl Charles, School Board Chair, Westminster
3. Jeanne Albert, School Board Chair, Lincoln
4. David Schoales, former School Board Member, Brattleboro
5. Margaret MacLean, former employee Rural School and Community Trust, former Executive Director Vermont Rural Education Collaborative, former Member Vermont State Board of Education, Peacham
6. Jay Denault Former Chair Missisquoi Valley Union High/Middle School Board, Former Chair Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union Board, Franklin
7. Anne Beekman, Chair, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union, Putney
8. Stacey Peters, Chair, Granville-Hancock Unified District Board of School Directors Vice-Chair, White River Valley Supervisory Union Board, Granville
9. Marty Strange, Randolph
10. Bill Jesdale, retired school administrator, Lincoln
11. Carin Park, School Board Director, Mountain Views School District, Barnard
12. Nancy Cornell, Editor & Publisher, Vermont Learning: past Associate Superintendent ANESU; past school board member Starksboro & ANESU, Starksboro
13. Jody Normandeau, former School Board Member and Chair, Dummerston
14. Paul Normandeau, former Selectboard member, Dummerston,
15. Herb Olson, Save Our Schools community coalition. Former member of the Mt. Abraham MS/HS, Starksboro
16. Dick Kelley, Treasurer and former chair, Waits R. Valley USD 36, Corinth
17. Polly Allen, Parent, Coach, Volunteer, Substitute Teacher, Community Member, Craftsbury
18. Melissa D. Hough, E.D. Educational Consultant, Peacham
19. David Kelley, Hazen Union School Board, Select Board, Greensboro
20. Randal Vaughn, Producer cruz.tv, Barnard
21. C Dart Thalman, PhD Professor Norwich University, Peacham
22. Dan Normandeau, former School Board Member, Dummerston
23. Wendy Stavseth and Jim Minnicello, Educators, Peacham
24. Phil Lovely, retired Guidance Director OSSU, LSSU, LNSU, Community Justice volunteer, Craftsbury
25. Greta Jane Quintin, parent, St. Johnsbury
26. Carolyn Kehler, former Lakeview and Hazen Union School Board Member, Greensboro
27. Timothy Maciel, Ed.D. WSESD Board of Directors, Brattleboro
28. Susan Meggiolaro, former Dummerston Town School Board Clerk, Dummerston
29. Diane Janukajtis, Stannard School Board, former Lakeview School Board member, Stannard
30. Diana Senturia, School Board Member, Peacham
31. Andra Hibbert, Educator, Vice Chair School Board, Peacham
32. Mark Clough, Chair School Board, Peacham
33. John Clarke - Professor Emeritus UVM College of Education & Social Services, Starksboro
34. Kristen Toy - School Board Member MAUSD Starksboro
35. Judy Murray, former VSBA Kingdom South Regional Representative, Vice-Chair Orange East Supervisory Union School Board, Blue Mountain Union School Board Member - Town: Wells River
36. Dell Waterhouse, retired teacher and current volunteer at Doty Memorial School, Worcester

37. Tom Frazier, former selectman, Co-chair of the Committee for the Future of the RVS Building (CFRB), Roxbury
38. Dan MacArthur, School Board Chair Marlboro, Windham Central SU Board member, Windham Region representative to the Vermont School Boards Association, Marlboro
39. Ray Mullineaux, NBGSD chairperson and board member, SVSU board member, N Bennington
40. Elizabeth Burrows, Member, Mount Ascutney School Board, Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union Board, State Representative, Windsor-1 District
41. J. V. Bryar, Athens and Grafton school board, Grafton
42. C. Scott Thompson, former Washington Central UUSD board chair, former school board member Calais
43. Scott Bossage, Calais Government Volunteer, Proud parent of a 6-year-old Calais Elementary School student. Calais
44. Chris Tormey, Cabot School Board
45. Caitlin Howansky, Doty Memorial School and Rumney Memorial School Parent
46. Rob Gardner, concerned citizen, Rochester
47. Deborah Stanford, Chair Windham Southeast School District (WSESD) Board Member Supervisory Union (WSESU)
48. Laura Chapman, former Putney Town School Board Director, Putney
49. Thomas Nolan, former WSESD Board Member and Present Dummerston Selectman, Dummerston
50. Eileen Riley, Educator, Marshfield
51. Lynn Talamini, Educator, Newbury
52. Steven Meggiolaro, Parent, Dummerston
53. Kyle Meggiolaro, Dummerston Class of 2020, Brattleboro Union High School Class of 2024, Dummerston
54. Travis Meggiolaro, Dummerston Class of 2016, The Putney School Class of 2020, Dummerston
55. Paul Jewett, former school board member NES, Chair OESU board, Newbury
56. John Brabant, former Vice Chair Calais Selectboard, Calais
57. Joanne Campisi, retired Elementary School Counselor, Calais
58. David Major, Westminster Town, School and Fire District Moderator, Westminster
59. Emmy Hausman, Educator, parent, former School Board member, Newbury
60. Mike Mrowicki, Windham 4 District, Putney and Dummerston, Vermont State legislature, Putney
61. Stephanie Kaplan, concerned citizen, Calais
62. Michael Prue, Select Board, Town of Irasburg
63. Dave Lahar, Select Board, Town of Irasburg
64. Patrick Cartee, Select Board, Town of Irasburg
65. Danielle Ingalls, Town Clerk/Treasurer, Irasburg
66. Chani Waterhouse, former Worcester School Board member, concerned citizen Worcester
67. Steve Redmond, former vice chair Guilford Central School Board, WSESU board and finance committee member, classroom volunteer, Guilford
68. Lila Richardson, concerned citizen, Worcester
69. Suzanne Hull-Parent, former school board member, Enosburg Falls
70. Brad Johnson, MAUSD School Board Member, Starksboro
71. Noah Weinstein, Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor, parent, Worcester
72. Elinor Osborn, concerned citizen, Craftsbury Common
73. Anne Hanson, parent, educator, Craftsbury
74. Val Mesa, parent, educator, Craftsbury
75. Judy and Jack Davidson, concerned citizens, Brattleboro

76. Linnie Jones, MSW, LICSW, concerned citizen, Dummerston
77. Akara Draper, ME'd, concerned citizen, Dummerston
78. Millard Cox, former special educator Middlebury Union High School, Middlebury
79. Anne Stevens, Educator, former Selectboard member, Greensboro
80. Jeremiah Goyette, Waits River Board Member, USD 36, Waits River
81. Molly Cierierski, Special Education Diagnostician, Recreation committee member, parent, Craftsbury
82. Anna Schulz, school board member, coach, parent, Craftsbury
83. Jean Dutton, parent, educator, Craftsbury
84. Don McLean, Former Chair Guilford Town School Board, Guilford