

Vermont **Rural School Community Alliance**

Education Transformation Platform
February 2025

WHO WE ARE

We are Vermont townspeople, educators, parents, grandparents, select board and school board members, school staff, and community members who support the power of public schools to enrich the lives of Vermonters. We are Vermonters who take collective responsibility for our schools. If our schools are successful, we celebrate them. If issues arise, we problem solve. When there are struggles, we stand with them. Our schools reflect our hopes and dreams for the next generation of Vermonters. We have come together to form the **Vermont Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)** because we are committed to advocating for the value and importance of public schools for our children and communities and for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future. **RSCA's goal is to encourage legislators to pursue meaningful property tax reform that strengthens Vermont's future while maintaining support for high-quality, equitable, cost-effective rural schools.** Our analysis and recommendations are grounded in direct experience with Vermont schools and research provided by leading rural education researchers. For more information, visit vtruraledu.org or email vtschoolsrock@gmail.com.

WHY WE HAVE COME TOGETHER NOW

The RSCA believes the Vermont Legislature should seek a balanced response to this 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?

On January 22, 2025, Governor Scott and the Agency of Education released "Governor Scott's Education Transformation Proposal." Details continue to emerge, and the Vermont Rural School Community Alliance is making these preliminary observations and recommendations based on details available as of February 17th.

The administration's plan seeks to overhaul our current education system with policy changes that are currently limited on detail. Without further information, RSCA has significant concerns about how elements of the plan will be implemented and the impact on rural students and their communities. In an education system that has been destabilized by the pandemic and by the rapid pace of legislative expectations over the last ten years, this proposal to simultaneously restructure funding, governance, and policy is unsettling. We need to be very thoughtful and deliberate if we are going to achieve property tax relief while simultaneously supporting Vermont children, families, schools, educators, and communities.

CONCERNS

Education Finance Reform

The importance of education to self-governance and the duty to ensure its proper and equitable dissemination have been enduring themes throughout Vermont's political history. We are proud of our history and of Vermont's commitment to equity. We understand the financial challenges facing Vermonters and the Governor's and legislature's desire to deliver on property tax reform. While this is important, we ask our elected leaders to deliver a solution that Vermonters can applaud while honoring the equity mandate in the state constitution's "Common Benefits" clause.

Geographic Consideration and Capital Construction

"Rural Vermont" refers to counties, schools and communities that can differ greatly from one another. What makes sense in rural Addison County may be very different from what makes sense in the Northeast Kingdom. While there will be some efficiency in uniformity, factors that are unique to each region – like transporting students – must be considered. Similarly, the realities of infrastructure and construction costs do not appear to be fleshed out in the current proposal. We worry about the communities we live in, given our geographic challenges and the limited capacity for schools to transform without millions of dollars of capital investment.

Role of the State Board of Education and the Agency of Education

The administration's proposal removes an important check and balance in our system. Under the proposal, the Board of Education is to give up its "rulemaking" authority and hand it over to the Secretary of Education. The plan proposes that the Agency of Education unilaterally create definitions and rules for cost effectiveness, quality, and "necessity" of schools and then implement the rules should specific schools not meet its standards. The State Board of Education plays a critical role in ensuring independent oversight of curriculum and other critical elements of our education system. In addition, the proposal would place a huge burden on an understaffed Agency of Education that would need substantial increases in staffing to achieve its goals.

Inequity of School Choice

Expanded school choice would greatly increase the likelihood of inequity in our education system and send increasing amounts of public money to private schools. It would likely intensify the challenges we are trying to solve.

Governance

We celebrate how Vermonters take responsibility for schooling and make long term commitments to school boards. We see this service as a strength of our current education system. Vermont has gone through significant governance change over the last 10-15 years. Further dissolving local school districts in favor of regional supervisory districts eliminates additional meaningful local engagement and oversight. We are concerned to have seen no details or verifiable evidence to demonstrate that this model would be more cost-efficient or effective in providing necessary services and support to schools and the children they serve.

School Closures

The plan's prototypical schools have 450 students each in elementary and middle schools, and 600 students at the secondary level. Increasing school enrollments to this size in Vermont would be an enormous change from the current reality. No details are provided regarding where the needed buildings will be, how long it will take for students to reach them, what buildings currently have capacities of this size, and what it would cost to create them where they do not exist. This leaves us concerned, as we see no road map from here to there that doesn't require closing a large number of existing schools with significant social and economic costs.

Many years ago, Vermonters made the decision to build union high schools regionally while retaining smaller K-12 facilities in geographically isolated regions. Vermonters worked together to agree to and build the union high schools that remain in use today. We stand willing to put in the work needed to transform schooling. However, we do not see the role of rural Vermont in the current iteration of the process. Any new plan must respect Vermonters' lives in rural areas and engage them in crafting solutions.

RSCA GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Guiding Principle: Elementary Schools. Young children should be educated close to home.**

We support Vermont public schools of all sizes. Elementary schools are a fundamental element to a thriving community. Communities with high quality and equitable elementary schools, childcare, preschool programs, afterschool programs, and summer programs serve as community hubs and economic drivers.

Recommendations:

- **Education hubs should surround elementary education in communities of all sizes.** Encourage multi-agency, community, and school district collaboration to ensure childcare, preschool, afterschool, and summer programs are coordinated and enhance early learning systems. Community education hubs drive economic development, and already exist in some communities, illustrating their potential around the state.
- **Support schools facing enrollment decline.** School communities must investigate new options when enrollment approaches unsustainable levels; any decisions should be made at a local level. Communities should receive facilitation support from the Agency of Education to develop an Education Sustainability Plan. The investigation would explore potential grade level changes, collaboration with neighbors, repurposing as childcare and preschool centers, etc. Developed with community input and approved by the school board and a community vote, the plan would be submitted to the State Board of Education for approval. This is not the time to abandon communities; it is the time to help them reinvent and emerge stronger.
- **Multiage classroom opportunities can be an effective response to enrollment decline.** The Agency of Education should provide technical assistance for schools that, due to enrollment decline, wish to implement multiage classrooms. This could produce staff savings.

- 2. Guiding Principle: Middle and high school children may benefit from larger regional schools.** Specific secondary programs in 7-12 and 9-12 settings, Regional Technical Centers, personalized learning, and community-based opportunities all play important roles in preparing students for their future. 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 comprehensive regional high schools, PK-12 schools harness the power of community and provide excellent individualized learning experiences.

Recommendation:

- **Convene regional planning entities to transform secondary education.** Each region should convene educators, community members, school board members, and youth to develop a robust and practical regional plan for secondary education among existing schools, communities, and career technical centers. Innovative regional opportunities should be considered; for example, utilizing smaller facilities as specialist academies in areas such as the arts or sciences. Each region should receive technical assistance provided by the Agency of Education. The plan developed should be adopted by school boards and voted on by the communities in the region.

- 3. Guiding Principle: Closing schools is not necessarily the fix for Vermont's problems – and could create damaging new ones.** Research shows no consistent correlation between cost and quality in relation to size, and closing schools frequently fails to produce the savings anticipated—after factoring in resulting increases in costs, such as transportation. While closure of unsustainable schools may be necessary, careful planning can mitigate some of the impact. *School closure should, however, be an act of last resort for these reasons:*

- Closing schools is damaging to children.
- Closing schools impacts equity.
- Closing schools in rural areas will likely negatively impact the community.
- Closing schools without due process damages public trust.

Additional documentation and research supporting the points above is available.

Recommendation:

- **Approach school closure with clearly articulated due-process requirements written into law.** A town vote on school closure is an essential element to ensure due process is attained. It will demonstrate that the planning process has resulted in comprehensive plans and mitigates avoidable negative consequences. We support H.180 as a bill designed to provide due process prior to school closures.

- 4. Guiding Principle: School Governance should be a partnership between districts and state.** State standards and accountability are important. School districts welcome clear expectations, rules, guidance, and accountability. Local governance also serves Vermonters well. Volunteer school board members known in their community bring a wealth of energy and life experience to the task of governing our schools at little or no cost. We can enhance governance by moving existing

structures to a larger scale using the supervisory union model. This should be a local decision encouraged by the state.

Recommendations:

- Independently evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of current laws.** The last report to the legislature on Act 46 (district consolidation) from 2020 only contained anecdotal information from seven of the 111 impacted school districts and was not released until 2024. What can we learn from the implementation of the law? Spending data (*Chart 1, right*) indicate that unified districts have not produced the cost reductions anticipated.

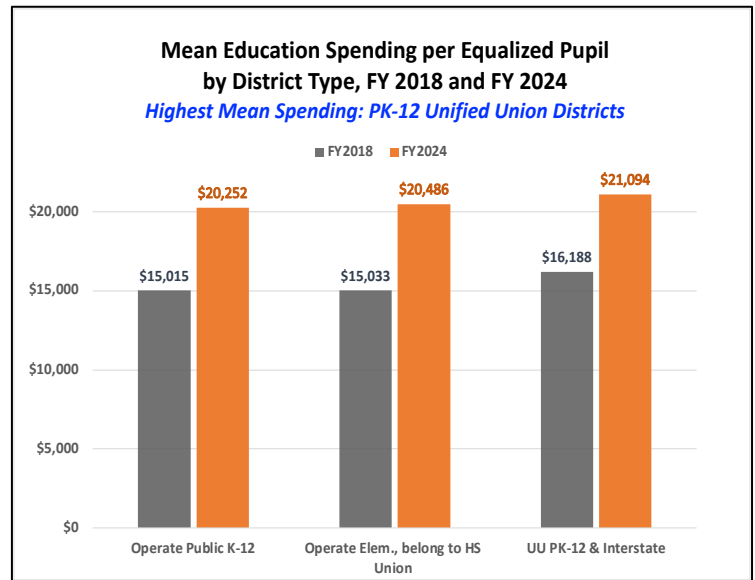


Chart 1
FY18 and FY24 Spending Per Equalized Pupil, by District Type
 District types and data: [VT Agency of Education Per Pupil Spending Reports.](#)

- Retain and consider expanding supervisory unions.** Evidence suggests that supervisory unions may be more effective than consolidated district models at curbing spending (see *Chart 2, below.*) An evaluation may indicate that supervisory unions, rather than consolidated supervisory districts, are models to replicate in the most rural areas of the state. In addition, larger merged districts appear to have diminished public support for public education: on Town Meeting Day 2024, 83 percent of budgets passed in single-town or city school districts that operate within supervisory unions, whereas only 38 percent passed in merged supervisory districts.

Maintaining a *supervisory union* model, in contrast, would allow for existing districts to collaborate in cost-effective, high-quality ways while supporting the power of participatory democracy to enhance the system.

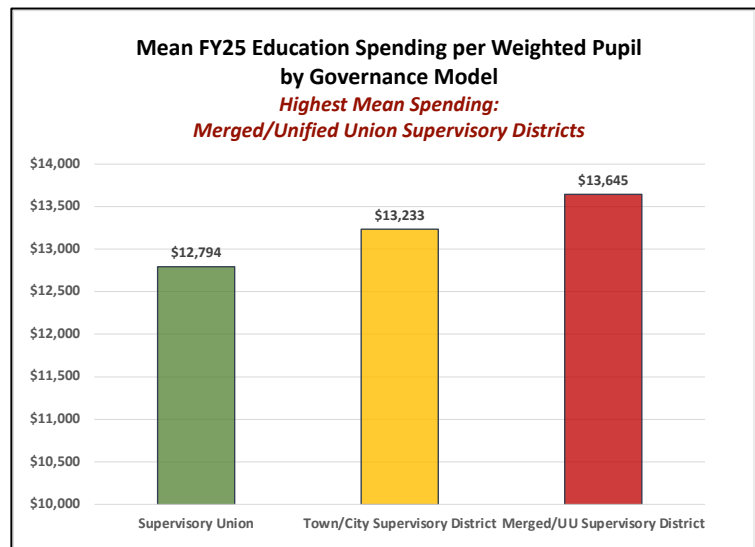


Chart 2
FY25 Spending Per Weighted Pupil, by Governance Model
 Data: [VT Agency of Education FY2025 Per Pupil Spending Report](#)

- Guiding Principle: Funding reform should center on equity and fairness, while strengthening Vermont communities.** We need an education funding system that provides immediate tax relief to low- and middle-income Vermonters and distributes education funds equitably, *while* strengthening

high quality education across the state. Achieving these goals will likely require a phased approach of short, medium, and long-term steps.

Recommendations:

- **Ground our funding system in fundamental equity as required by the Vermont Supreme Court’s holding in Brigham v. State.** To the extent that modifications to our current funding system are proposed, sufficient evidence must be presented to Vermont communities demonstrating that the new system will “ensure substantial equality of educational opportunity throughout Vermont,” both by design and in practice.
- **Provide immediate tax relief while enhancing tax fairness in the long-term.**
The complexity and lack of transparency for taxpayers in our current system is problematic. We are open to considering new financing proposals to achieve tax relief, transparency and fairness. However, property tax reform must coincide with thoughtful and equitable education transformation that does not sacrifice quality or access for Vermont students.
- **Ensure education funding equity through enhanced accountability and oversight.**
Our current pupil weighting and tax system aims to improve education funding equity by providing additional tax capacity to districts, but does not require that this capacity translates to additional resources actually reaching the students who need it. To ensure that equitable funding is achieved in any system, sufficient accountability and oversight structures must be developed.
- **Pursue a comprehensive approach to healthy students and communities.**
The provision of mental health and other support services in schools has increased dramatically over the past five years, impacted both by the pandemic and by the lack of services available in some regions. This has been both a dramatic cost driver for school districts as well as an area of inequity across the state. We should develop a comprehensive approach to the delivery of education and support services to Vermont students and families by exploring successful community schools models and collaboration between Vermont agencies.

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VERMONT RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

The time to defend Vermont's rural public schools is NOW.

Since January 1st, 2025, the following school boards, municipalities and education support groups have formed the **Rural School Community Alliance**. Members listed below have voted to join or have votes scheduled for the coming weeks:

School Districts, Supervisory Unions

- Westminster School District
- Athens Grafton School District
- Marlboro School District
- Peacham School District
- Craftsbury School District
- Cabot School District
- Lincoln School District
- Canaan School District
- Ludlow Mt. Holly Unified Union School District

Mountain Views Supervisory Union

- Barnard Academy
- Killington Elementary
- Reading Elementary
- The Prosper Valley School
- Woodstock Elementary School
- Woodstock Union Middle and High school

Windham Southeast Supervisory District and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union

- Dummerston
- Brattleboro
- Putney
- Guilford

White River Valley Supervisory Union:

- Strafford School District
- Rochester Stockbridge School District
- Granville Hancock Union District
- Sharon School District
- First Branch School District
- White River Unified District

North Country Supervisory Union:

- Coventry School District
- Brighton School District
- Charleston School District

- Derby School District
- Holland School District
- Jay Westfield School District
- Lowell School District
- Newport School District
- Troy School District
- NCUHS District
- NCUMS District

Orleans Central Supervisory Union:

- Orleans Central Elementary District (serving Barton, Glover, Irasburg, Brownington, Orleans, and Albany)
- Lake Region Union High School District

Grand Isle Supervisory Union:

- South Hero
- Grand Isle
- North Hero
- Alburgh

Lamoille South Supervisory Union

- Elmore
- Morrisville
- Stowe

Municipal Support

- Town of Greensboro Select Board
- Town of Peacham Select Board
- Town of Barnard Select Board
- Town of Ripton Select Board
- Marlboro School Association
- Peacham Parent Teacher Group

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>

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>