Community, Democracy and Education:
The Case for Voluntary Collaboration and Supervisory Unions

Position Statement

July 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community, Democracy and Education: The Case for Voluntary Collaboration and Supervisory Unions summarizes **key reasons to support multi-district supervisory unions** and other collaborative models as a preferred approach to further consolidation of school districts **if** such consolidation occurs in the process of implementation of Act 73. There is little to no evidence to indicate that cost-savings are achieved through school closures and school district consolidations. Vermont-specific evidence supports the position that **supervisory unions are the most cost-effective structure to provide quality education and manage rising costs, especially in Vermont's rural areas.** Among the reasons for their cost-effectiveness, they are closely tied to their communities through democratic processes and held more accountable for spending.

BACKGROUND

Vermont has a long history of educational reform efforts with mixed results. Several reforms have been implemented in recent years with no definitive evaluation of their successes or shortcomings. Recent discussions of the transformation of current educational systems were initiated principally by concerns over rising costs and subsequent increases in tax rates for Vermonters. There is a clear consensus that the rising costs are unsustainable. The question remains, **how to achieve the goal to 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?** An attempt to answer that question resulted in the passage of H.454, now Act 73, signed into law on July 1, 2025.

We know that the cost of public education in our state is unsustainable, largely driven by large yearly increases in costs such as health insurance. We continue to believe, based on Vermont-specific evidence, that **further large-scale district consolidations are not the answer,** in large part because there is substantial research showing the negative effects of mandated consolidation on all communities, particularly rural communities, including a lack of cost-savings. The newly-formed Redistricting Task Force is charged

with proposing no more than three new school districts in Vermont, one of which must include the supervisory union governance model. **It is essential that any such proposals be grounded in accurate, Vermont-specific cost-benefit analysis.** It will then be up to the Vermont legislature to review those results and recommendations in order to determine whether such a massive transformation of Vermont's educational governance structure is warranted.

Vermont is a rural state. **Vermont has the highest percentage of rural students in the nation** (54%), with 71.2% of Vermont schools considered to be rural and more than half of all students attending school in a rural district (Showalter et al., 2019). A 2025 report from University of Vermont Professor Daniella Hall Sutherland states: "There is over 100 years of research on the outcomes of school and district consolidation, yet there is no empirical consensus that consolidation results in reduced educational costs in rural areas (Howley et al., 2011). In rural contexts, projected savings are offset by increased transportation costs (Collins, 2019; Killeen & Sipple, 2000), staff salaries (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012), and infrastructure needs (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007)."

Democracy is at risk, and district consolidation erodes local oversight and accountability. Further, **there are no clear and consistent economic benefits from creating mega-districts** that dissolve local ties. **Per-pupil spending data and qualitative evidence do not show that school closures and consolidations significantly reduce costs**, or reduce them at all. When you factor in known consequences such as increased transportation costs, maintenance of empty buildings, costs for expanding infrastructure, and reduced property values, the numbers just do not show cost savings.

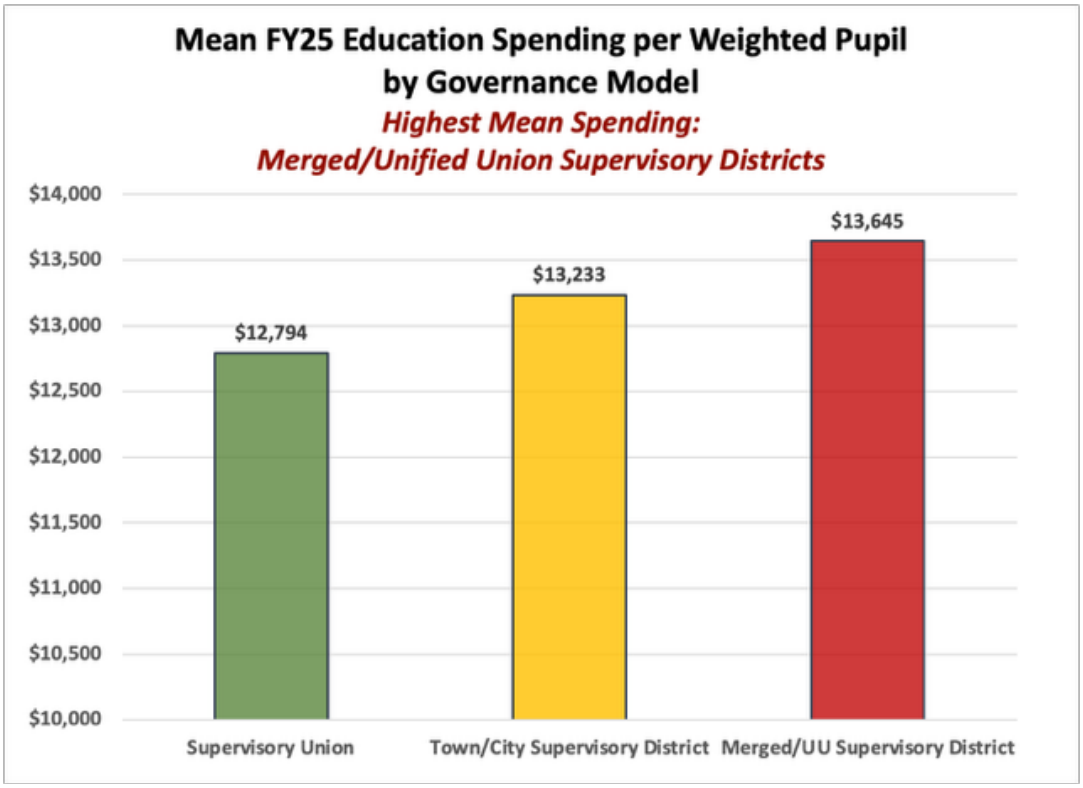
However, there is strong evidence that **voluntary approaches to creating collaborative systems, and even voluntary mergers, can create cost-savings and improve educational outcomes** in some situations. Cooperative alliances that facilitate cost-savings and improve systems while still retaining deep local roots make sense. **This position statement supports a voluntary process by which collaborative efforts can achieve the outcomes of improved education for**

students at reasonable costs. In sum, if consolidation is to occur, the best approach is expanded supervisory unions—not large supervisory districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Recognize the value, effectiveness and efficiencies of collaboration between school districts and supervisory unions to create potentially larger supervisory unions.** It is essential that the differences between multi-town supervisory districts and supervisory unions are well understood. Many **supervisory districts (SDs)** are made up of formerly independent town school districts, in which, under Act 46, local school boards were dissolved and new boards representing the member towns were created. While such unified supervisory districts may be appropriate in some regions, in more rural areas these structures aren't practical to operate, given large geographic distances and sparse populations. Further, as noted below, such merged SDs are on average more costly to operate than other models.

In contrast, a multi-member **supervisory union (SU)** is made up of school districts that retain town school boards or small clusters of towns with a joint school board. Locally elected school boards collaborate to achieve cost reductions and efficiencies in service. The SU model provides a balance between the financial benefits of shared and collaborative services and the community-centered benefits of local and responsive school boards. Vermont's diverse geography and population distribution require a nuanced approach and all models should be on the table. Some districts face extreme geographic challenges and low population density, making consolidation impractical and counterproductive. Getting the scale wrong could increase costs rather than be more cost effective in rural areas. **Vermont data indicate that supervisory unions are more cost effective than merged school districts.** Multi-district SUs on average have lower per-pupil spending than either single or multi-town merged SDs. Here is a chart using Vermont Agency of Education data to illustrate this point:



2. **Fully analyze different governance models in Vermont and ground decisions in this analysis.** In order to make informed decisions about potential new district organizational structures, it is critically important to understand how Vermont's governance structures are actually functioning, rather than relying on assumptions about savings from consolidation or scale that may not be accurate. For example, the chart above shows that merged supervisory districts have the highest average per-pupil spending, while the multi-district supervisory unions have the lowest. Data such as these should be a starting point for further analysis, evaluation and decision-making.

3. **Require foundational data analysis.** As part of the work of the new Act 73 Redistricting Task Force, conduct an analysis of 8 years of data from 2017 to the present to determine changes in SU and school district budgets, numbers of students (by total, equalized, and weighted), numbers of employees in categories, test score data, Panorama or other school environment data, and other relevant

quantitative and qualitative data to create a profile to determine trends, cost reductions and/or increases. The analysis should Identify changes in the school governance structures during that period, e.g., from single districts to merged districts, noting voluntary or forced mergers, and include names of member districts. This provides a base of Vermont-specific data for comparative purposes, and will make it possible to determine which governance models are associated with what outcomes.

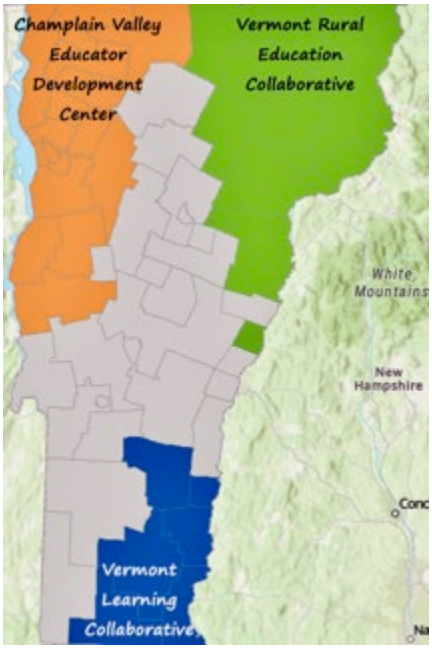
4. **Minimize community disruption by respecting democratic processes and local knowledge**. If new governance models are indicated, local education leaders and communities should be empowered to explore potential restructuring that aligns with Vermont-specific, evidence-based cost efficiency and educational quality. Evaluation of new structures should not be a one-size-fits-all process.
    - Districts must be able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of larger structures—whether as SDs or SUs—without immediate disruption to their existing governance. This approach preserves stability while allowing communities to make informed decisions about potential consolidation or restructuring.
    - Local districts, with authentic community input, should be allowed to reimagine supervisory union and school district models in ways that reflect their specific needs while maintaining a balance between collaborative efficiency and local responsiveness.

5. **Strengthen effective local governance.** Participatory democracy is not just a valued tradition in rural Vermont—it is a functional and effective system that enhances public education. Maintaining local governance structures helps ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of Vermont's diverse communities. Any changes to school district governance must be guided by the democratic process and the practical needs of rural areas.
    - Creating overly large governance units creates distance between local taxpayers and the schools that serve the community's children.

- Rural school boards play a vital role in supporting schools, solving problems, and ensuring local effectiveness. Local school boards provide oversight and accountability. As the only directly elected members of our education system, their connection to communities and voters is vital. They provide a locally informed, and essential, check and balance for the system.
- As members of supervisory union boards, these local boards collaborate as equals, prioritizing the best interests of all students within the union. Their relational trust and cooperative approach foster efficiency without sacrificing local oversight.
- Rural school boards provide significant value at minimal cost, striking a necessary balance between regional efficiency and local responsiveness.
- **At a time when democracy is fundamentally threatened in the US, it makes no sense to further erode local civic engagement.**

6. **Support and incentivize collaborative governance models**. If further consolidation does appear warranted after appropriate in-depth analysis using Vermont data, two major opportunities currently exist: expanded supervisory unions and Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). These can be implemented in parallel. Rather than being mandated, they can be achieved using formal and informal cooperative agreements within and across supervisory unions.

Figure 1: Existing Collaborative Partnerships



What Could It Look Like?

Regional collaborations are not new to Vermont. Figure 1 reflects some current examples of cooperative models in place in Vermont including the Vermont Rural Education Collaborative, the Vermont Learning Collaborative, and the Champlain Valley Educator Development Center. The success of these organizations has been due to the voluntary nature of the partnership and the collaborative design of the programs that meet the unique needs of the members. This map shows the scale of those three current collaboratives in Vermont.

7. **Re-examine the potential of the BOCES Model.** The Vermont legislature passed Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) legislation in 2024 (Act 168). BOCES have the potential to reduce costs and increase efficiencies while providing quality education to Vermont's children and youth at a cost taxpayers can afford. This premise is similar to that of Act 73. It makes sense to include a rigorous analysis of the intent and implementation to date of the BOCES legislation enacted last year. BOCES models have been used effectively in many states and meet many of the goals that our current educational reform proposals are trying to address, including increasing student learning opportunities and finding cost-saving efficiencies across member districts. Member supervisory unions in Windham County, working with the Vermont Learning Collaborative, have submitted a BOCES proposal to the Vermont Agency of Education, signifying their willingness to explore and implement this model.

Why BOCES? When Act 168 was enacted by the Vermont legislature in July 2024, this was the stated intent: "This act is one of the initial steps in ensuring the opportunity to transform Vermont's educational system. It is the intent of the General Assembly to address the delivery, governance, and financing of Vermont's education system, with the goal of transforming the educational system to ensure high-quality education for all Vermont students, sustainable and transparent use of public resources, and appropriate support and expertise from the Agency of Education."

Opportunities for cost-savings were suggested in these areas:

- applying for State, federal, and other grants;
- supporting staff and educator development, recruitment, and retention;
- supporting transformation of operations or implementation of new State initiatives or quality standards;
- providing high-quality, evidence- and science-based professional development in a coherent and consistent way;

- providing or ensuring access to regionally available specialized settings for students with unique needs or highly specialized needs in the least restrictive environment, with a focus on reintegration and early intervention;
- managing prekindergarten programs to ensure equitable access to high-quality prekindergarten programs;
- procurement of services to support education, from food service to transportation, given the lack of enough vendors to ensure competitive bidding;
- providing skilled facilities planning and management; and
- providing appropriate support and instruction for English learners.

In addition to those listed, RSCA notes that BOCES offer potential opportunities for cost-savings in reduction of central office services, including superintendent services and those in business offices such as payroll and grants management.

The BOCES legislation further emphasized the importance and value of community schools: "Additionally, community schools also facilitate the coordination of comprehensive programs and services that are carefully selected to meet the unique needs of students and families and build on the assets they bring to their schools and communities."

BOCES and similar education collaboratives have reduced costs significantly in other states. The ability for school districts and other entities to share resources and reduce costs, as well as improve quality, has been well documented. A useful (hypothetical) example illustrating the potential for both improved quality and decreased costs is in the area of professional development (Stanley, 2005). Pooling of resources through a BOCES can lead to:

- **Improved quality.** Together BOCES members can afford presenters with greater expertise;
- **Avoided duplication of services.** Planning and delivery of shared programs is more efficient;
- **Reduced administrative costs.** Coordination of programming no longer needed in each supervisory union or district;

- **Reduced materials costs.** Centralized promotion and mailing create savings; and
- **Improved equity of opportunity.** All educators and staff have access to higher quality offerings.

CONCLUSION

School governance should balance local leadership with regional efficiencies. Local governance serves Vermonters well. Participatory democracy is a cherished value in Vermont, exemplified by Town Meetings, so it is essential that the democratic process be the guide to consideration of any changes in governance of Vermont schools and districts. That means votes count, and votes matter. Towns should have the opportunity to decide if and when to close schools, and if and when to merge with other school districts and supervisory unions.

The value of local, elected school board members should not be underestimated. They know their communities, have the trust of their voters, and can help to keep costs down while maintaining and improving the quality of their schools. Dissolving school boards puts further distance between local issues and possible solutions. Volunteer school board members known in their community bring a wealth of energy and life experience to the task of governing Vermont's schools at little or no cost.

With local leadership in place through the school boards and local school administration, cooperative agreements can be established to achieve efficiencies where helpful. That is the underlying premise of supervisory unions, union high school districts, and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES): Locally-elected town school boards come together in voluntary, cooperative arrangements to achieve improved educational quality, cost reductions, and efficiencies in service while maintaining civic engagement. These models provide a balance between the financial benefits of shared and collaborative services and the community-centered, democratic benefits of local and responsive school boards.

PRELIMINARY TIMELINE

2025 to 2026

Year 1	
August 1, 2025	Redistricting Task Force begins its work.
August 1, 2025 to November 15, 2025	• School district boards begin to build understanding of the mechanics of Act 73. • RSCA board members discuss structures such as SU/s or SD's and decide the best match moving forward for their districts. Boards pass motions reflecting their discussions and communicate their intent to the redistricting taskforce, their legislators, the press and their communities. • The Act 73 Redistricting Task Force should request the Agency of Education to conduct a **Foundational Data Analysis of all existing supervisory districts and supervisory unions,** including budget data from 2017 through the present. • Existing school districts and supervisory unions should review the state's **Foundational Data Analysis** for accuracy and completeness. • **School districts and supervisory unions should begin to explore the feasibility of enlarging supervisory unions/ districts in their area as well as creating Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)** according to the criteria and timeline in Act 168 passed in July 2024. • Regional meetings of supervisory unions and/or school districts should be held to compare and discuss data, with a goal of determining where efficiencies, cost savings and improved educational outcomes might be achieved, within larger supervisory union structures and through collaborative models such as BOCES.

November 15 – December 30, 2025	Supervisory unions and supervisory districts review the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Public Education as well as those of the Redistricting Task Force. Following their review, they communicate with their legislators about their assessment of the impact of those recommendations, indicating their approval or disagreement with accompanying rationale.

2026

Year 2	
January, 2026	The Vermont Legislature considers the Recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Public Education and reviews and votes on the Recommendations from the Act 73 Redistricting Task Force. Next steps are contingent on legislative approval of a Redistricting map.

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