



Memo: Vermont support for Small Schools and Schools in Sparse Areas
Rural School Community Alliance
October 27, 2025

This Memo provides recommendations and guidance regarding Vermont's support for small schools and for schools located in sparsely populated communities. As indicated in Act 73, the state intends to provide education funding grants to eligible small schools and to eligible schools in sparse areas; in addition, Act 73 directs the State Board of Education (SBE) to determine "proposed standards" for such eligibility. Act 73 supports **local elementary schools**, central middle schools, and regional high schools. The majority of schools referenced as small in sparsely populated areas of the state are elementary schools. The Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA) is submitting this testimony to the SBE committee charged with developing these proposed standards.

RSCA advocates for the importance of rural community public schools and for a democratic voice in decision-making about their future. The rapid expansion of our recently-formed organization—now including representation from over 100 Vermont towns and villages—demonstrates that concern for the future of public education is alive and well in Vermont, and that folks in rural school districts across the state want their voices to be heard. The Alliance celebrates this expression of civic activity, especially in a time when strengthening democratic engagement is as important as ever.

There are four main points we want to convey:

- 1. Appropriate state support of small schools is required, to ensure that children have equitable opportunity to achieve common state standards. Such support can be conditioned on geographic isolation, as long as the criteria used to designate a school as "geographically isolated" are objectively measurable and consistently determined, and the accompanying standards are applied fairly.**
Support for small schools (enrollment <100) could be conditioned on the sparsity of the school's location (town or village), with sparsity below 36 receiving higher support, and sparsity at least 36 but below 55 receiving lower support.
- 2. Irrespective of enrollment size, appropriate state support of schools is required to ensure that children have equitable opportunity to achieve common state standards.**
The state should support schools in towns or villages with low population density. Sparsity below 36 could receive higher support, and sparsity at least 36 but below 55 could receive lower support.
- 3. Vermont is predominantly rural, with more than half of students attending schools in rural, often remote, areas. Schools in Vermont are often the beating heart of a community—especially in remote regions of the state. Therefore:**
The default position for the state should be to adequately support children in rural, remote schools, in order to offer equitable opportunity to meet state standards.
- 4. In the context of determining the level of state support for small schools or for schools that are in communities with low population density, terms such as "necessary," "by choice," and "by preference," are prejudicial and infer bias without an evidentiary base.**
Any effort to close schools based on the premise that children can attend another school should be undertaken with that specific and transparent goal, not as a result of failing to meet a condition or "standard" for supporting small or rural schools.

Below we present discussion and evidence in support of these points.

1. **Appropriate state support of small schools is required to ensure that children have equitable opportunity to achieve common state standards. Such support can be conditioned on geographic isolation, as long as the criteria used to designate a school as “geographically isolated” are objectively measurable and consistently determined, and the accompanying standards are applied fairly.**

Recommendation Support for small schools could be conditioned on the sparsity of the school’s location (town or village), with sparsity below 36 receiving higher support, and sparsity at least 36 but below 55 receiving lower support.

In their April 8, 2025, memorandum to the Joint Fiscal Office, Kolbe and Baker provided per-student cost estimates (updating their prior modeling and analysis) that formed the basis for the Act 73 student education funding formula. They summarized these estimates as follows [emphasis in original]:

*The **base funding amount per student is \$15,033 in FY2025 dollars.** This amount is equal to the total spending required for a student with no additional needs and who attends a school with no additional costs to meet the state’s academic performance standards.*

*The **updated analyses identified the following cost factors that will require cost adjustments in a future formula...***

Included in the list of “cost factors that will require cost adjustments” are “students who attend schools with fewer than 100 students,” and “students who attend schools that are in sparsely populated areas with fewer than 55 persons per square mile.” Kolbe and Baker further clarify the purpose of these cost adjustments as, “The additional spending required for students with different needs and who attend small or remote schools to meet state academic standards.”

Thus, it is clear that additional state support is required to ensure that students in schools with fewer than 100 students and (independently) in schools that are in sparsely populated areas have sufficient resources to meet state standards.

The authors also note that such support “...could be conditioned on schools meeting criteria for geographic constraints that prevent them from operating at scale.”

As discussed further below, using sparsity as a measure of geographic remoteness—and therefore, a barrier to operating at scale—is the most appropriate and fair option. Indeed, population density is:

- objectively measurable;
- available for all Vermont school locations;
- calculated and applied the same way everywhere; and
- a recognized additional cost factor.

By contrast, other geographic measures do not meet these criteria and/or can’t be appropriately made into a standard. For example, while distance school-to-school can be determined, the information can’t be fairly or consistently applied in this context, since children travel from their *home* to school, not from one school to another, and these distances vary enormously regardless of relative school-to-school proximity. Therefore, any cut-off point used as a proposed standard will misrepresent the actual experience of children and families. Further, school-to-school distance doesn’t capture other important factors, such as type of road, terrain, seasonal variations, etc.

More generally, rural towns with small schools themselves vary greatly in size—from around 15 square miles to over 60—and families can live in all corners of towns spread over a large geographic area. While a school building might be a reasonable distance to the next nearest school in another town, some families may be closer to a different school

in a different direction. Thus, school-to-school distance is not a consistent measure of geographic remoteness, and does not capture the actual experiences of children in an equitable way.

For the reasons discussed above, if the goal is to understand changes in students' travel experiences in attending a different school, using data about actual bus routes and time on a bus is a fairer approach. However, in using this information to create an eligibility standard for critical state support of schools, challenges arise—for example: how readily available and accurate are bus routes and times? Is it possible to aggregate/summarize these data in a valid, reliable, and consistent way? In a given town the next nearest school may differ depending on the location in town of families—which routes should be mapped? What is the terrain and road surface travelled? How long on a bus is “too long”?

In sum: to ensure that all students in Vermont have appropriate resources to achieve academic standards, state support of small schools is required. If the state wishes to condition this support on a measure of geographic remoteness, sparsity of the school location is the best choice and could be set at 36 for a school to receive the highest level of per-pupil funding.

2. Irrespective of size, appropriate state support of schools is required to ensure that children have equitable opportunity to achieve common state standards.

***Recommendation** The state should support schools in towns or villages with low population density. Sparsity below 36 could receive higher support, and sparsity at least 36 but below 55 could receive lower support.*

Low population density of a school's location is itself a robust measure of geographic remoteness. As with the small school grant, to ensure that all students in Vermont have appropriate resources to achieve academic standards, state support of schools in sparsely populated areas is required. If the state wishes to condition this support further, it is reasonable to reserve the highest level of support for schools in the areas with lowest sparsity.

As noted above, the area of sparse communities ranges from around 15 square miles to over 60. This is a geographic indication of territory needing to be covered by a school bus on a bus route to school. As with sparsity, town area is objectively measurable, is available for all Vermont school locations, and can be calculated and applied the same way everywhere.

3. Vermont is predominantly rural, with more than half of students attending schools in rural, often remote, areas. Schools in Vermont are often the beating heart of a community—especially in remote regions of the state. Therefore:

***Recommendation** The default position for the state should be to adequately support children in rural, remote schools, in order to offer equitable opportunity to meet state standards.*

Supporting small, rural, and remote schools means supporting its communities and young families, which are both critical to Vermont's future. If a small or remote school is grappling with issues, the position of the state should be to understand why and work collaboratively with the community to find solutions that are appropriate and supportive.

In any case, the overall question should be: with state support, can the small and/or remote school satisfy education and district quality standards? If not, what is driving their challenges? Careful steps already are in place for such situations, which allow the school or district to develop a plan for improvement. These processes should be respected and followed.

Since additional funding for students in small sparse schools is needed to ensure that they can meet state standards at equitable levels as students in other settings, failing to adequately support these schools could be discriminatory.

4. In the context of determining the level of state support for small schools or for schools that are in communities with low population density, terms such as “necessary,” “by choice,” and “by preference,” are prejudicial and infer bias without an evidentiary base.

Recommendation Any effort to close schools based on the premise that children can attend another school should be undertaken with that specific and transparent goal, not as a result of failing to meet a condition or “standard” for supporting small or rural schools.

Language matters. A school can’t “choose” to be sparse, if it is located in a town or village that has low population density. Similarly, a *public* school can’t “choose” to be small: it can’t turn away students out of “preference.” In the end, whether a school is “geographically necessary” amounts to asking: should this school exist because there is no other school nearby “enough”?

As indicated above, **closing a local elementary school should only be an option of last resort** and should be directly tied to state educational and/or district quality standards that apply to all schools. We provide below some of the important consequences of closing schools—especially when done without community support or careful and ethical planning.

Closing schools is damaging to children. Research 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.
- Are unable to fully access school opportunities due to transportation and distance.
- Face negative impacts from declining family and community engagement in schooling.

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 tend to result in the redistribution of where money is spent rather than financial savings.

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. Without accessible schools, rural children are further disadvantaged.

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.

Research Articles and Supporting Data/Information

School Closures

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>

Bus Rides

'A Lot Of Road To Cover': As Schools Close Some Kids Face Longer Bus Rides
<https://tinyurl.com/4j5br2mw>,

Study Links Longer School Bus Rides to Chronic Absenteeism
<https://tinyurl.com/2s48rcy5>

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

Table: Vermont schools with enrollment ≥ 100 and sparsity < 55

Notes: Enrollment does not include Pre-kindergarten. Location refers to the town/village where the school is situated. All data from VT AOE.

School Name	Location (if not in name)	Enrollment (2-yr avg.) FY24 & FY25	Location Sparsity	Location Area (sq. miles)
EDEN CENTRAL SCHOOL		103.5	20.3	63.9
MILLERS RUN SCHOOL US #37	Sheffield	129.0	20.9	33.0
CONCORD GRADED/MIDDLE SCHOOL		127.5	21.5	53.4
MONTGOMERY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		130.5	21.7	56.4
BRIGHTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		110.0	22.9	54.3
SUTTON VILLAGE SCHOOL		104.5	24.2	38.5
THE NEWTON SCHOOL	Strafford	104.0	25.0	44.3
ORWELL VILLAGE SCHOOL		100.0	25.1	49.7
CHARLESTON ELEM SCHOOL		102.5	25.8	38.5
CANAAN SCHOOLS		149.5	26.9	33.3
WASHINGTON VILLAGE SCHOOL		109.5	27.1	39.0
LELAND AND GRAY UHS #34	Townshend	244.5	30.4	42.6
TUNBRIDGE CENTRAL SCHOOL		118.0	30.7	44.8
BAKERSFIELD SCHOOL		126.0	30.9	42.2
WAITS RIVER VALLEY US #36	Corinth	239.0	30.9	48.3
WATERFORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		127.5	32.6	39.7
CRAFTSBURY SCHOOLS		186.5	33.2	39.6
TWIN VALLEY MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL	Whitingham	198.5	34.6	39.1
BROWNINGTON CENTRAL SCHOOL		105.5	36.1	28.4
FOLSOM SCHOOL	South Hero	138.0	37.0	46.4
CABOT SCHOOL		134.5	38.2	38.4
BERKSHIRE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		159.0	38.3	41.9
BARNET ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		119.0	38.4	43.6
COVENTRY VILLAGE SCHOOL		113.0	38.7	27.8
DANVILLE SCHOOL		307.0	38.8	61.0
SHARON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		130.0	39.0	40.3
FERRISBURGH CENTRAL SCHOOL		131.0	43.5	61.2
DORSET SCHOOL		173.5	45.0	47.5
ALBURGH COMMUNITY ED CENTER		167.0	45.4	47.5
BARTON GRADED SCHOOL		130.5	45.6	43.7
LAKE REGION UHS	Barton	351.0	45.6	43.7
TROY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		168.5	46.9	36.5
BURKE TOWN SCHOOL		165.0	48.8	33.7
NEWPORT TOWN SCHOOL		103.0	51.5	43.5
TWIN VALLEY ELEM SCHOOL	Wilmington	153.0	53.6	42.5
FLOOD BROOK SCHOOL	Londonderry	257.0	53.7	36.0
CHESTER ANDOVER US		221.0	53.7	56.0
GREEN MOUNTAIN UHS	Chester	301.5	53.7	56.0
RICHFORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		151.5	54.1	43.2
RICHFORD JR/SR HIGH SCHOOL		223.0	54.1	43.2

Table: Vermont schools with enrollment < 100 and sparsity < 55

Notes: Enrollment does not include Pre-kindergarten. Location refers to the town/village where the school is situated. All data from VT AOE.

School Name	Location (if not in name)	Enrollment (2-yr avg.) FY24 & FY25	Location Sparsity	Location Area (sq. miles)
WOODFORD HOLLOW SCHOOL		25.0	7.4	47.6
PEACHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		46.0	15.0	47.7
RIPTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		37.5	15.1	49.5
LOWELL GRADED SCHOOL		69.0	15.6	56.6
JAY/WESTFIELD JOINT SCHOOL		65.5	15.7	34.0
NEWARK SCHOOL		55.5	15.7	37.2
STOCKBRIDGE CENTRAL SCHOOL		31.5	15.9	46.1
READING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		26.0	16.7	41.3
ATHENS/GRAFTON JOINT CONTRACT SCHOOL	Grafton	31.5	16.9	38.2
ROCHESTER SCHOOL		74.5	19.1	57.2
READSBORO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		35.5	19.3	36.3
HALIFAX SCHOOL		69.0	19.3	39.8
TINMOUTH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		54.0	19.3	28.8
LAKEVIEW US #43	Greensboro	18.0	19.8	39.6
BARNARD ACADEMY		56.0	20.9	48.3
NORTH HERO SCHOOL		34.0	20.9	46.0
BENSON VILLAGE SCHOOL		77.0	21.3	45.4
SHREWSBURY MOUNTAIN SCHOOL		62.0	21.8	50.3
STAMFORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		66.0	21.8	39.6
ELMORE SCHOOL		13.0	22.2	39.5
SUNDERLAND ELEM SCHOOL		53.5	23.2	45.6
WOODBURY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		49.0	23.9	39.3
THE PROSPER VALLEY SCH	Pomfret	82.5	24.0	39.6
ALBANY COMMUNITY SCHOOL		88.0	24.4	39.0
WALDEN SCHOOL		56.0	24.8	39.0
DOTY MEMORIAL SCHOOL	Worcester	63.0	25.0	38.4
BRIDPORT CENTRAL SCHOOL		50.0	26.6	46.3
SHOREHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		65.5	27.5	46.1
LUNENBURG/GILMAN SCHOOLS		54.5	27.6	45.5
WESTSHIRE SCHOOL	West Fairlee	59.0	27.6	22.8
ORANGE CENTER SCHOOL		78.5	27.8	39.0
MT HOLLY SCHOOL		90.5	27.9	50.0
GLOVER COMMUNITY SCHOOL		83.0	28.4	38.5
WARDSBORO CENTRAL SCHOOL		41.5	29.6	29.3
KILLINGTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		90.5	29.7	47.6
LINCOLN COMMUNITY SCHOOL		76.0	29.7	45.8
IRASBURG VILLAGE SCHOOL		71.5	29.9	40.5
TOWNSHEND VILLAGE SCHOOL		79.5	30.4	42.6
SMILIE MEMORIAL SCHOOL(BOLTON)	Bolton	50.5	30.6	42.2
CURRIER MEMORIAL US #23	Danby	52.5	30.9	41.7
BROOKFIELD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		69.0	31.0	41.2
NEWBURY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		90.0	31.1	62.5
CHELSEA ELEM MIDDLE SCHOOL		91.5	31.5	40.1
BRAINTREE SCHOOL		83.0	31.6	38.6
MIDDLETOWN SPRINGS ELEM SCHOOL		50.0	34.9	22.7
CAVENDISH TOWN ELEM SCHOOL		66.0	35.4	39.6
FLETCHER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		99.5	35.8	38.6
FAYSTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		93.5	38.6	36.5
ROBINSON SCHOOL	Starksboro	95.5	39.3	45.6
SALISBURY COMMUNITY SCHOOL		58.5	40.8	30.1

School Name	Location (if not in name)	Enrollment (2-yr avg.) FY24 & FY25	Location Sparsity	Location Area (sq. miles)
NEWBROOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	Newfane	77.0	41.4	40.0
BEEMAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	New Haven	80.5	41.4	41.5
BETHEL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		99.0	42.3	45.8
WOLCOTT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		97.5	42.5	39.3
WATERVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		69.0	42.7	15.7
MARLBORO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		70.5	43.4	40.7
CALAIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		75.0	43.4	38.6
BINGHAM MEMORIAL SCHOOL	Cornwall	91.0	44.0	28.7
RUMNEY MEMORIAL SCHOOL (MIDDLESEX)	Middlesex	96.5	45.6	39.8
OTTER CREEK ACAD AT LEI SUD AND WHITING	Leicester	76.5	46.3	21.8
WEYBRIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		45.0	46.9	17.6
SAMUEL MOREY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	Fairlee	83.0	48.9	21.0
WALLINGFORD VILLAGE SCHOOL		97.5	49.1	43.0
BREWSTER PIERCE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	Huntington	81.5	50.2	38.3
DOVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		63.5	51.3	35.9
WELLS VILLAGE SCHOOL		63.5	52.3	23.2