

Subject: Act 73 - Protecting Opportunity, Community, and the NEK's Future

Thu 2/19/2026 1:05 PM

Dear Senate Education Committee Members,

I am writing as a parent in Waterford, a business owner in St. Johnsbury, and someone deeply invested in the long-term future of the Northeast Kingdom.

I recognize that the most recent Senate map is an improvement for our region, and I appreciate the effort to listen and adjust. However, the fundamental premise of Act 73 remains deeply concerning, because the policy framework still fails to demonstrate how eliminating school choice and consolidating districts will achieve the goals being promised.

Act 73's criteria explicitly include providing the "least amount of disruption to students as possible." If a plan disrupts stable school pathways, long-standing sending and receiving patterns, or successful regional cooperation while also increasing transportation costs and extending the amount of time students spend traveling to and from school then it fails one of the law's own stated standards.

In the Northeast Kingdom, geography matters. Our communities are rural and spread out. Consolidation does not shorten distances it often lengthens them. Longer bus routes mean higher fuel costs, more staffing demands, additional wear on equipment, and significantly longer days for students. If cost control is a primary objective of Act 73, it is difficult to reconcile that goal with policies that may increase transportation expenditures in one of the most geographically expansive regions of the state.

Taking away options for our students does not create opportunity it limits it.

For more than 100 years, St. Johnsbury Academy has served as the de facto public high school for many towns in the Northeast Kingdom through Vermont's tuitioning system.

This is not an abstract policy debate for our family. My husband is a graduate of the Academy and serves on its Alumni Council. We specifically chose to purchase our home in Waterford because of the strength of the elementary school and the ability to send our son to St. Johnsbury Academy for high school.

School choice in our region does not create fragmentation it creates stability.

Beyond academics, removing choice reduces opportunities for students on athletic fields, courts, stages, and in technical programs that small rural districts simply cannot replicate at scale. Consolidation may reduce lines on a map, but it does not automatically increase program depth or student access. In fact, increased travel time can further limit participation in extracurriculars, athletics, and after-school programming, particularly for students who already face transportation challenges.

This bill also runs counter to the economic realities of the Northeast Kingdom.

In the Northeast Kingdom, school choice is not a luxury it is infrastructure. St. Johnsbury Academy and other independent schools in our region are not just educational institutions they are economic engines. As business owners, my husband and I regularly hear from employees and customers who chose to relocate here specifically because of the educational opportunities provided through St. Johnsbury Academy and Lyndon Institute.

At a time when Vermont is confronting population decline and workforce shortages, eliminating school choice does not strengthen our appeal it weakens it. Families move here because rural living is paired with meaningful educational opportunity. Removing that option does not appear to solve the fiscal or demographic

challenges facing Vermont. In fact, common sense suggests it may exacerbate them.

If the goal of Act 73 is cost control and improved educational outcomes, I respectfully ask: where is the evidence that eliminating school choice achieves those outcomes particularly in rural regions where transportation costs and logistical complexity are inherently higher? The map may change, but the underlying policy remains unproven.

We need reform that expands opportunity and strengthens regional identity not reform that narrows options, increases costs, and destabilizes communities that are already functioning well.

I urge you to reconsider the elimination of school choice and to demand clear, measurable proof that Act 73 will accomplish what it promises before fundamentally altering the educational landscape of Vermont.

Respectfully,

Jenn Barrett

Waterford, VT