

Chris Tormey: Testimony to Senate Education Committee
3/19/2026

Good Afternoon, Senators:

Thanks very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Chris Tormey. My wife Mary Ann and I have lived in Cabot full-time since 1989, our three grown sons are graduates of its preK-12 school, and I've served on the Cabot School Board since 2004. I'm also a retired teacher: I taught Biology and Earth Science at Lamoille Union High School in Hyde Park for 33 years.

I know that you all are trying this session to come up with a plan and a statewide map to improve preK-12 education in this state and also to make it less costly. As both a teacher and a school board member I'm familiar with that challenge.

First of all, I appreciate that your committee's draft map of Vermont's school districts and enlarged supervisory unions was revised earlier this week to include our Cabot School District as part of the enlarged "Caledonia Area" Supervisory Union. For the past 5 years our district has benefited from both the collaboration and administrative support of being part of the Caledonia Central SU- along with the Danville, Twinfield, Peacham and "Cal Coop" school districts. Last summer our board asked the Legislature's Redistricting Task Force to include us in the Caledonia area as part of any map of new Supervisory Unions for two reasons. Along with continuing to benefit from that support and collaboration, both our board and community felt strongly that remaining an independent school district within an enlarged SU would continue to allow us the greatest control over the future direction and operation of our school.

Secondly, I'd like to comment briefly on several pieces of the Governance Modernization document that you've drafted to accompany your new map. I think that two of them could definitely help:

- Providing a democratic process and supporting funds to create larger SU's could over time make administering schools more efficient and less costly
- Supporting schools to investigate options for merging voluntarily with other schools could potentially result in greater learning opportunities for students

But I feel strongly that the part of your plan that allows the State to force-merge districts in 2028 that haven't decided to do so on their own (as a step in halving the number of districts statewide) is not a good idea, and I hope that you'll consider eliminating it from your plan. I have several reasons for feeling that way:

1. The Legislative Task Force that worked for 4 months last summer and fall doing research and holding hearings statewide could find little evidence that forced consolidation of school districts could either reduce costs or by themselves improve student outcomes (but found lots of evidence that the time and energy consumed by these forced processes got in the way of school improvement efforts already begun). The Task Force also concluded that the education system's biggest cost drivers (health care and special education among them) would not be addressed by creating bigger school districts

2. Because of current student numbers, force-merging two or three independent districts to make one larger district run by a single board will inevitably lead to consideration of closure of parts or all of the smaller member schools in an effort to cut costs (Roxbury, Calais, etc.)

The short-term savings realized by those closures may allow passage of a given year's budget, but the long-term effects for a town that loses its school can be dire. In a time when retaining young people in Vermont and attracting new young people from elsewhere is a priority, how does closing the community school in twenty or thirty towns like Roxbury or Calais help achieve that goal?

When we first moved to Cabot in 1983 the school enrolled 180 students, and the following year the Town Report recorded 19 births. Ten years later enrollment had increased to 250, but by 2003 had dropped to 229- and this year it stands at 160.

Cabot's enrollment curve has followed Vermont's as a whole (a 25% slide over the past two decades) but I don't think that consolidating districts and potentially closing a lot of small schools that are often the focal point of their communities will necessarily save money. Here's one piece of supporting evidence:

Just to our west, The Washington Central Unified Union School District was formed a decade ago after Act 46: the U-32 Middle and High School and the five elementary schools within it are all governed by a single board. This year their proposed budget included education spending of \$16,372 per "LTWADM" student, and the average Homestead Tax rate across the 5-town district was

estimated at \$1.99 per \$100 of assessed Homestead value. Cabot School's 2026-27 budget that was just passed on Town Meeting Day includes Education Spending of \$14,626 per LTWADM student, and is projected to raise the Homestead Tax rate to \$1.31/\$100.

In conclusion, I've seen firsthand in my town the very positive impact that a strong, dynamic school can have in a small community. As you work this spring to fashion a plan that can both limit cost increases and improve quality in our schools, I'd ask you to keep in mind the impact of that plan on the vitality of small communities like Cabot across Vermont. With that in mind, I'd strongly suggest that your Committee revise your draft plan in two ways:

- Include language supporting the development of shared-services structures (BOCES) to realize efficiencies and significant savings both now and over the long term.
- Eliminate the "forced merger by the State" language, and instead support the efforts of individual school districts like ours to explore voluntary mergers or other ways that we can expand the opportunities for our kids (like regional high schools, for example) while continuing to sustain and improve our hometown schools- along with the communities that they're such an integral part of.

Thanks again for the opportunity to share my perspectives with you today.

Chris Tormey
Chair, Cabot School Board