

Testimony to Vermont Senate Education Committee - March 19, 2026
Seamus Abshire, Board Chair, South Burlington School District

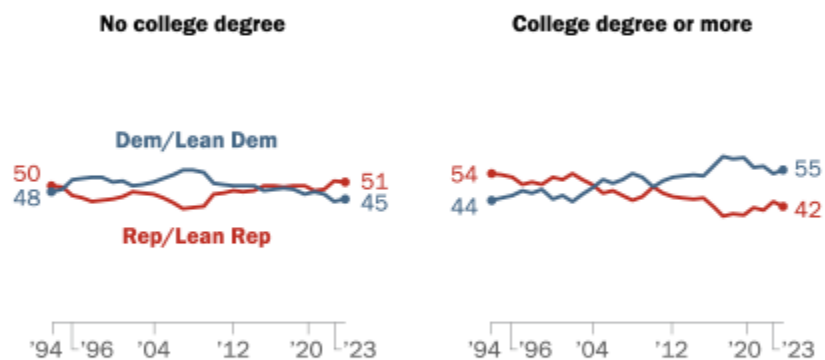
My views are my own and do not represent the views of the South Burlington School Board or the South Burlington School District.

Today, I want to talk about how public schools can help heal the blue collar/white collar divide in Vermont politics. I want to talk about how this blue collar/white collar divide has reached a critical level in South Burlington and is already causing our schools to get worse. And I want to talk about how I believe your committee can help, by requiring all school districts to merge until they can provide certain services, instead of requiring a certain number of students.

First, let's talk about the blue collar/white collar divide. The Republican party has become the party of blue collar Americans. According to Pew Research, [a more than 10 percentage point gap has developed over the last 10 years](#).

GOP has edge among voters without a college degree, while college grads continue to favor Democrats

% of registered voters in each group who are ...



Note: Based on registered voters. Telephone data adjusted for survey mode; details in Appendix A.

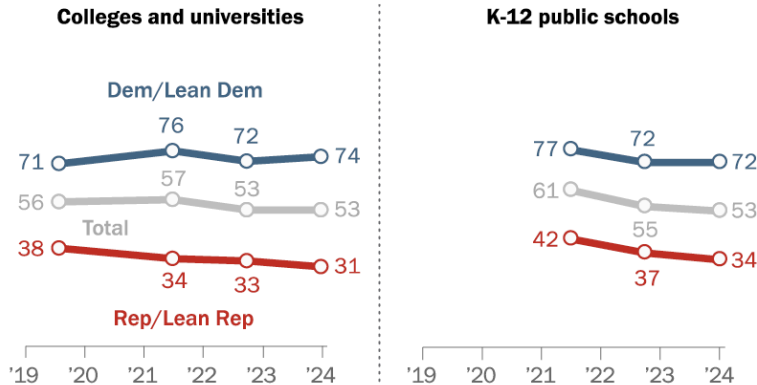
Source: Annual totals of Pew Research Center telephone surveys (1994-2018) and American Trends Panel annual profile online surveys (2019-2023).

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At the same time, Republicans have stopped believing in public schools. According to Pew Research, [support for K-12 public education has dropped by almost 10 percentage points among Republicans in the last 5 years](#).

Democrats about twice as likely as Republicans to have positive views of colleges, K-12 public schools

*% who say each of the following has a **positive** effect on the way things are going in the country these days*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 16-21, 2024.

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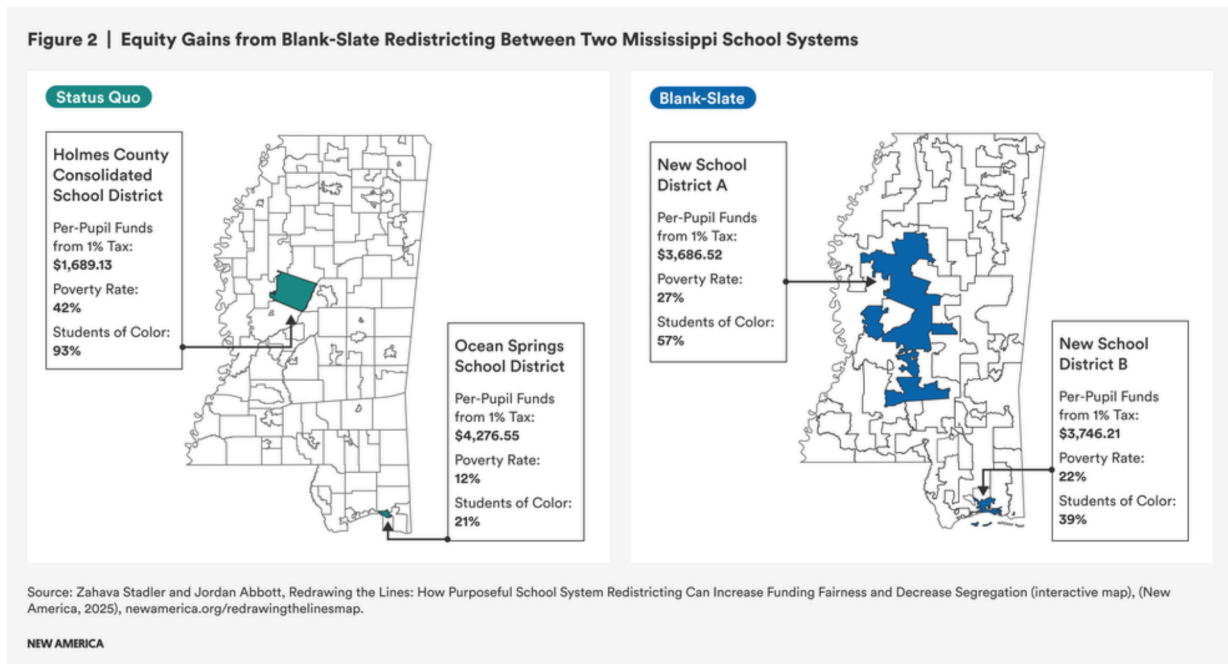
That's because public schools have failed people who want to join the blue collar world. Kids who are excited to learn about how to be electricians, carpenters, and HVAC technicians don't get the same priority as kids who are excited about going to college. We do have excellent centers for technology here in the state of Vermont. But last year, South Burlington had a 50% acceptance rate to CTEs, and a 0% acceptance rate for HVAC. That is - four South Burlington kids raised their hands to study HVAC, at a vulnerable point in their lives, and were told the system didn't have a spot for them.

At the same time, school newsletters celebrate the Neuroscience Club. We have 14 Advanced Placement classes in our district alone, and dozens more in districts across Chittenden County. We have 725 AP enrollments in our high school alone. School Board is mostly by and for college-educated parents. That's the white collar world. Yesterday, I called around the county to confirm what I already knew - outside of a CTE, we have only one functioning wood shop in the whole county.

And remember - CTEs aren't even accessible until 11th grade. You heard that right - you have to make it through 11 years of school before you get a class dedicated to working with your hands, then you have to be bussed 20 minutes each way to Essex or Burlington, and even then, there's only a 50% acceptance rate.

Unsurprisingly, our schools have lost the trust of blue collar voters. They don't recognize what we're teaching and feel disrespected. In South Burlington, we can barely pass budgets. This year, our budget passed by 100 votes out of 4000. This has been making our schools worse for years. We haven't been able to renovate or build. We're locked in a downward spiral.

Luckily, the solution is inside School Districts. This year, South Burlington is revising our mission, and I hope that we will place the trades at the same priority as college. This will force our Superintendent to allocate our own local budget toward the trades, without depending on outside funding. Hopefully, we'll start to see foundational education about carpentry, electronics, and other vocational education in our middle school in the coming years.



Source: Map exports from newamerica.org/redrawingthelinesmap. Graphics by Natalya Brill/New America.

So, what can your committee do about it? Think about redistricting as an opportunity to improve education for future blue collar workers. According to a [September 2025 report by the think tank New America](#), redistricting can increase fairness and economic integration by double digits. They were thinking about racial fairness, but I think it also applies to blue collar / white collar fairness.

So, instead of requiring districts to be of a certain size, set expectations of what all school districts must provide. It can't be a very long list, or it will be unworkable. But there is one key requirement I think you should have. Require districts to provide foundational trade education directly in their schools, starting in middle school, without needing kids and parents to fill out forms, deal with multi-district bureaucracy, get on buses, and get out of district.

I'm not sure that Winooski or South Burlington or Colchester would be able to do this alone - we might have to merge. But we would have positive reasons to merge, not just saving money.

And let me be clear. Adopting a “shared services” model to serve blue collar interests, while providing white collar interests directly in district schools, is not fair. It’s a cop out. No matter how well you your BOCES, if kids have to go through extra bureaucracy to get the education they need, that is not equal treatment. I suggest that you require every district in Vermont serve its blue collar and white collar constituents equally, or merge with other districts until it can do so.



Lyman Hunt Middle School wood shop - the only one in Chittenden County outside of a CTE

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