

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak with you on the topic of mandatory class size expectations in Vermont public schools. Before I share my thoughts and observations on this topic, let me set some context for these views by providing my background.

I am a lifelong Vermont resident, having lived in the state for all but 12 years: four while in college and eight years when I served in the U.S. Navy. I graduated from the Bellows Falls Union High School in 1984, graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1988 with a degree in Mathematics, and earned a Masters Degree in Teaching Mathematics while serving as a Flight Instructor at NAS Pensacola in Florida. Soon thereafter, I was hired to teach math at my alma mater, where I worked for 25 years (3 as a math teacher, 6 as assistant principal, and 16 as the principal.) Currently I am in my fifth year as a classroom teacher at the Windham Regional Career Center in Brattleboro, where I have taught math and am currently teaching a relatively new two year career center offering called Aviation Careers. I am also currently the chair of the BFUHS Board of School Directors (I am not sure how I let someone talk me into that...but that is a topic for a different committee.)

Because I need to acknowledge that I am not well informed of the deliberations and research that may have gone into the planning for potential legislation that would mandate class size minimums, I am simply organizing this testimony as a series of points that I encourage the committee to consider as you deliberate over this topic. I apologize if these have already been well considered. I present these points with all of the practical experience that I have gathered from my aforementioned 30 years as an educator, from my 12 years as a public school student in Vermont, and from my experiences of a father of five grown children, all of whom spent all of their years in public education in Vermont and have gone on to four year college degrees and productive professional careers.

Now, the following topics are things that I hope you address when considering class size mandates:

1. Because of the rural nature of our state, to faithfully commit to what might be seen as “traditional” class sizes in the high teens to low 20s (or even higher for some content areas), smaller schools would need to join with other small or larger schools. This would undoubtedly call for lengthy commutes from home to school that would not serve our students well.
2. An alternative to the previous point while still adhering to a strict class size mandate would be to reduce offerings at the smaller schools, potentially eliminating some valuable courses that serve a smaller segment of the student population but are important for certain career aspirations.
3. A potential solution to the previous point might be online/virtual courses. As a member of the BFUHS Board, I am the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union representative to the River Valley Technical Center Board, which oversees the Vermont Virtual Learning Collaborative (VTVLC). That is Vermont’s state level virtual “public school” which serves all grades with virtual course offerings and does so in a high quality way. Therefore, I am well acquainted with the great work done through this provider of online learning. This can work for some, but is a challenge for others. Success in virtual learning is an

“acquired skill” which does not allow for the widest possible range of learning styles that our students bring to the classroom the way that in-person learning does. It is one thing for our education system to provide these online learning opportunities. It is an entirely different situation when, instead of making it an opportunity, it becomes the only way for certain students to access certain content when that content might have been available in person if not for class size mandates.

4. As a principal for 16 years, I was actively involved in each of those years in building the master schedule for the following year. I am concerned that the hands of the master schedule building team in any school will be tied when they bump up against a class size issue. In April, when building the schedule for the next year, what number close to, at, or over the set number for a certain course do I use to guide the decision to leave it in or take it out of the master schedule? When August rolls around and a class that had the number needed to meet the mandate now has three fewer students due to a change in student preferences or students moving out of town, does the class still run? It probably needs to for the sake of the schedules for all of the other students in the class, but will that “small” class be a black mark for the school in whatever accountability system is used to impose the mandate?

Recognizing time constraints in any committee meeting, I will let these four points serve as my testimony to the committee on the topic of class size requirements in Vermont public schools. Thank you for hearing me out.