Subject: School Funding Bill

Mon 2/16/2026 1:16 PM

Dear Vermont Senate Committee on Education,

I am writing again to you to express my concern and thank you for your attention to the matter of continued public funding for K-8 independent schools in Vermont.

I have two children, current 5th and 3rd graders at The Riverside School in Lyndonville. They have both thrived as students at Riverside where their independence and differences are seen, fostered and supported. This little school is the main reason why my husband and I decided to stay and settle down in the Northeast Kingdom over 10yrs ago. We moved into Kirby because of school choice. We love the model of an independent school that is accessible to the local community and not just those who can afford a private school. That is the beauty of the community of schools like Riverside.

I hope you take the time to read through the following email in support of Riverside. In the words of my daughter, a current Riverside student, "I love Riverside because we get to go outside a lot and everyone is really nice and everyone can participate in everything and it is a really great school."

Cost of Riverside to the State:

- Schools like Riverside do not drive educational spending, we operate within the state's announced tuition amount.
- The state's announced tuition (which is all that Riverside receives from the state) is much less than the local districts' per-student cost.
- The announced tuition is not a true measure of the overall cost of a student for Riverside or public schools. We fundraise from private donors (including families and faculty) to cover this difference.
- The value school choice brings to the Kingdom cannot necessarily be measured by this metric.
- The tuitioning towns overwhelmingly approve this model every year.
- Threatening to close a high functioning school because other districts are too expensive is not logical

The state releases its "announced tuition rate" every year. Independent schools like Riverside play no role whatsoever in setting this number. In no way do schools like Riverside drive education cost increases. Rather, when accepting publicly funded students, we operate within the constraints of the announced tuition, which does not meet the full cost of educating a student at Riverside (nor at local public schools). Unlike public schools, we do not have access to title grants, facilities bonds, free and reduced lunch reimbursement, or any other revenue streams public schools have. We fundraise to

make up the difference in these costs, whether that be bake sales, yard sales, raffles, fundraising letters, etc. If we need a new building, we approach donors to try to find the money for that. If a family is not able to afford healthy lunches for their child(ren), Riverside provides that at no cost to the state.

Our outcomes, equity, and who we serve:

- Thanks to the 2200 series rules, Riverside offers special education services: 25% of our K-8 students are either on IEPs, 504's, or ESTs.
- Riverside's unique model of education is working: even while opening admissions and expanding services (see above), our standardized test scores have gone up over the last five years while scores locally and nationwide have plummeted.
- The towns with access to PK-8 choice are rural and underserved relative to the population centers of Vermont.
- Over 60% of Riverside students live in tuitioning towns, over 30% are private pay.
- Riverside has opened its admissions and now uses a lottery system for available spots after accepting siblings, etc.
- Riverside alumni have a long history of success in high school and beyond. Many local leaders are Riverside alumni.
- Threatening to close a high functioning school because other districts are too expensive is not logical

	2024 **Riverside** "proficient and above"	2025 **Vermont** "proficient and above"	2025 **Riverside** "proficient and above"
Math	**82%**	**39%**	**70%**
ELA	**76%**	**56%**	**81%**
Science (5th and 8th only)	**75%**	**42%**	**71%**

Riverside has, over the last several years, opened its admissions: once we've accepted students into our smallest grades and accepted siblings, we use a lottery system for our final spots. In addition to this more open admissions process, we have begun offering special education. We are proud to say that, during this time of growth, our VTCAP standardized test scores have gotten higher every single year- *including the 20-21 school year when nationwide scores plummeted.* We follow AOE guidelines for multi-tiered systems of support, even though we are only reimbursed for a portion of that extra expense. We work very hard to fundraise for most of the academic and emotional supports that we provide.

Simply put, Riverside offers one of the very best educational experiences in the state to a very broad spectrum of students, many living in rural, underserved towns. We are able to do this because of our independence. We have a long history producing alumni who go on to have great success in the Kingdom and beyond.

Riverside's benefit to the Northeast Kingdom:

- We often hear from local business leaders and realtors that independent schools are a big draw for families considering moving to the Kingdom.
- We also know that many families have stayed in the Kingdom thanks to the educational experience their children.
- Vermont has long been looking for something to convince professional families to move here. School choice is helping with that, and it's happening in the Kingdom, where we need it the most.
- Local high school teachers, principals/headmasters, and admissions affirm the success of our alumni and the benefits to their school of having Riversiders attend.
- Many local business leaders are Riverside alumni.

Threatening to close a high functioning school because other districts are too expensive is not logical

Our impact goes well beyond the "choice towns" we serve: school choice is an economic driver in the most impoverished parts of our state. Local realtors and institutional and business leaders consistently state that school choice in general and often Riverside in particular are excellent draws for professional families considering moving to the Kingdom. It is surely an anchor for many young families as well. For decades, Vermont and the NEK have been seeking ways to increase our taxbase and encourage more young families to move here. School choice is working to do just that, and it is working in the NEK, where we need it the most.

The importance Vermont's system of local control:

- One of Vermont's oldest, and most important traditions is town meeting day. In many ways, that defines the state's system of governance.
- The choice towns overwhelmingly vote to confirm this model every year.
- Towns around the state passed 92% of school budgets last year, indicating broad support from nearly every township in all parts of the state for the current model of educational funding.
- Threatening to close a high functioning school because other districts are too expensive is not logical

Often the national debates about "vouchers" and "charter schools" get conflated with Vermont's historical model of choice. Understandably, sometimes legislators who live in the more populated parts of the state don't have first-hand experience with what choice schools mean to their communities. It is the case that the towns that offer K-8 (or 7-8) choice came together as a community and made that decision, and by approving their town budgets, they vote overwhelmingly every year to continue and confirm their preference for school choice for their own community. This idea of local control isn't just a quirk that is unique to the Kingdom, it is a defining thread of Vermont's very existence:

"*Think of town meeting as the earliest form of government in the state of Vermont, it's been held for the last 250 years on the first Tuesday in March. And many people view it as democracy in its purest form.*" (Bob Kinzel on an episode of *Brave Little State*)
It's no accident that the state's birthday was on the first Tuesday of March in 1791- the tradition of local democracy is in the very DNA of this brave little state.
Our place in the educational ecosystem:

- Every school district has schools within different strengths and opportunities, whether that be in arts, athletics, or supports.
- Riverside fills a niche in our area for students who are looking for a mission-driven school that provides opportunities such as outdoor ed, world languages, fine and performing arts, and a strong focus on the social emotional development.
- Both students in choice towns and private pay students have scores of other excellent options, Riverside offers one choice and is part of the rich educational ecosystem the NEK enjoys. This choice is one of the best things the NEK has going for it.
- The national conversation of "charter schools" and "vouchers" is **very** different from the historical system of independent schools serving rural areas in Vermont.
- Families who do not feel served by Riverside are free to leave and take their tuition with them at any time. There is intense pressure on the school to meet the expectations of students and families.
- Threatening to close a high functioning school because other districts are too expensive is not logical

Within any given school district, there exists an "ecosystem" of educational opportunities for our children. One school in the district may have a better band program while another may have a better sports team or better reading interventions. It is absolutely the norm that students are able to find their "just right" school within their district. Riverside has no designated students- kids from the NEK Choice District or Peacham can attend whatever school they feel is best for them. We exist under a kind of pressure not known in public schools. If we offer a substandard education *in any grade,* those students can immediately transfer to another school without question or penalty, and Riverside would lose their tuition for the remainder of the year. It is for that reason that Riverside has had to work so hard to develop an identity and seek top-tier faculty. Schools that know what they do and why are better able to serve the students that choose to attend them.
Simply put, Riverside serves some students that other schools do not, just as every local school does.

For 45 years, Riverside has served choice towns in the NEK. If Riverside were denied access to state tuition, it would have to serve only those students whose families could afford the tuition out of pocket. This would deny access to the Riverside experience to several local towns, while forcing their children to attend what would potentially become even larger and potentially more poorly funded schools. If you were to ask the generations of students who have passed through Riverside thanks to state and local laws and laws tuition about their time here, you would see that this school is not only providing a "good bargain" for the state, we are changing lives and creating the next generation of leaders for this state we all love so much.

Please do not force Riverside, and other schools like it, to close.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Perreault