

Hello,

I am submitting public comment on education funding and Act 73 implementation on behalf of the Essex Westford School District Board.

The attached letter addresses concerns about healthcare cost drivers, the Redistricting Task Force recommendations, and the impact of proposed changes on local communities.

https://www.essexreporter.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/letter-to-the-editor-the-whole-story-of-vermonts-education-tax-crisis/article_324ad440-2d6d-46ce-b456-ea59e8ea35ca.html

Please confirm receipt and let me know if you need additional information.

Warmly,
Jemima

Jemima Talbot
She/Her
Clerk, Advocacy Committee Chair
EWSD School Board

Attached:

Letter to the Editor: The whole story of Vermont's education tax crisis

This letter is from Jemima Talbot and the Essex Westford School District School Board Advocacy Committee.

On Dec. 1, Commissioner of Taxes William Shouldice IV predicted that Vermont property taxes will jump an average of 12% next year. He warned that if this happens, education property taxes will have climbed nearly 41% in just five years. His letter included a graph showing student enrollment declining while education taxes climb — a seemingly damning picture of wasteful school spending.

(https://tax.vermont.gov/sites/tax/files/documents/2025_Education%20Tax_Rate_Letter.pdf) But this tells only part of the story. Vermonters deserve the whole truth.

Vermont's Healthcare Crisis

Yes, education costs have increased. Everything costs more these days. But there's one cost driver that dwarfs all others, and it's conspicuously absent from the state's narrative: health insurance.

In 2018, Vermont moved public school employee health benefits to statewide bargaining. Since then, costs have exploded. From fiscal years 2019 to 2026, health insurance costs increased 113.6%. (<https://vehi.org/>)

Let that sink in. More than doubled in seven years.

In the Essex Westford School District, we cut 100 employee positions between FY24 and FY25 to contain costs. Even with 100 fewer employees, our healthcare costs continued rising.

So yes, Governor Scott and Commissioner Shouldice are right that education taxes have increased. What they don't mention? The main cost driver is health insurance, which the state negotiates. Vermont already has some of the highest health insurance premiums in the country. (<https://wallethub.com/edu/states-where-people-spend-the-most-least-on-health-insurance/145713>)

If Montpelier were serious about lowering education spending, wouldn't health insurance be the first place to look?

Yet on Dec. 1, Governor Scott blamed local school boards instead, "Without intervention from Montpelier and/or school boards reducing spending growth, Vermonters will face an average 12% increase next year. I find this totally unacceptable."

(<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/17pAiQtnNj/>)

Vermonters find these tax rates unacceptable, too, Governor. The EWSD school board has done everything in its power to contain costs. We've painfully cut 100 positions over two years. How much more can we cut while maintaining educational outcomes that are consistently above the state average?

Education Reform And Act 73

Act 73 (<https://vtdigger.org/2025/12/04/act-73-explained-10-things-to-know-about-vermonts-education-reform-law/>) promised universally welcomed goals: improve education quality and reduce costs. Who could argue with that?

But here's the problem: this sweeping reform was rushed into law with no set implementation plan and zero evidence to support the Governor's proposed implementation approach. (<https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2026-01-05/vermonts-landmark-education-reform-law-faces-uncertain-future-in-montpelier>) The law passed. The plan? That was supposed to come from experts.

So Governor Scott appointed a Redistricting Task Force. After months of research and community engagement, they delivered their expert recommendations.

The Governor's response? He called their work a failure.

(<https://vtdigger.org/2025/11/14/they-failed-gov-phil-scott-admonishes-school-redistricting-task-force/>)

Not because the task force failed to do its job. Not because their analysis was flawed. But because their expert conclusions didn't match his predetermined plan. Through his public addresses, imposed deadlines, and agenda-setting, Governor Scott has made one thing clear: he intends to implement Act 73 his way, expert recommendations be damned.

Rather than value the insights of the committee he appointed, he's dismissed them and is pushing forward to reshape Vermont education on his own terms.

The narrative from Montpelier is built on convenient omissions.

The Governor's Plan

The implementation plan that Governor Scott and his supporters want would carve Vermont into 13 districts of wildly disparate sizes. The largest would serve nearly 22,000 students. The smallest? Just over 2,000.

(<https://aoa.vermont.gov/sites/aoa/files/2025-10-28%20Wolk%20and%20Beck%20Redistricting%20Template-CTE-Region-Modified-Map-v01.pdf>)

This isn't a plan. It's a map with numbers on it.

There's no research showing these mega-districts would save money or improve outcomes. There's no plan for merging employee contracts with different salary scales and benefits. There's no clarity on how special education funding would work across these sprawling new boundaries. There's been no community input.

What does exist? Research showing the opposite of what the Governor claims. Larger districts don't automatically mean lower costs or better education. Often, they mean the reverse: more bureaucracy, less local accountability, and communities losing their voice in how their children are educated.

Declining Population and Growing Student Need

Montpelier's narrative focuses on "wasteful" school spending while taking no responsibility for skyrocketing healthcare costs. But healthcare isn't their only sleight of hand.

Take Commissioner Shouldice's focus on "student attendance." Yes, enrollment is declining as our state population also declines. But counting heads tells an incomplete story.

What matters more than how many students we have is what those students actually need. That's measured by pupil weights, a calculation that accounts for grade level, economic disadvantage, English language learners, and other factors determining the services each student requires. A kindergartener from an affluent family needs different support than a high school student learning English while living below the poverty line. Not all students cost the same to educate.

In EWSD, while enrollment has declined, student weight has increased. Our students need more support services than ever before. This pattern likely holds across Vermont. Students' needs are growing, not shrinking.

Yet Commissioner Shouldice's letter uses only attendance numbers, presenting a picture carefully crafted to support a predetermined narrative: schools are wasting money on fewer students. The reality? We're serving students with greater needs.

What Vermonters Actually Want

If Vermont is serious about reducing education costs, the state must address the healthcare crisis it created in 2018. A 113.6% increase in seven years is unsustainable. Blaming school boards for expenses the state controls is dishonest.

We, as a school board, share what every Vermonter wants: lower education costs and more affordable taxes. We know the path forward: fix healthcare. The people of Vermont understand this. Local school boards understand this. Yet instead of taking responsibility, Montpelier is using these tax increases- increases they largely caused- to justify fundamentally reshaping Vermont education through Act 73.

This isn't fiscal responsibility. It's political maneuvering at the expense of our students and communities.

Vermonters and their local school boards are doing everything possible with shrinking resources to serve students with growing needs. We've made the hard cuts. We've absorbed the rising costs we can't control. We're honest about the challenges we face. We deserve state leaders who will do the same- leaders who tell the whole truth rather than cherry-pick data to advance an agenda. Leaders who tackle the healthcare costs they negotiate rather than scapegoat the local boards working for their communities. Leaders

who align themselves with what Vermonters actually want, not what serves their political goals.

It's time for accountability in Montpelier, not redistricting in our communities. State leaders created the healthcare cost crisis that is driving these tax increases. They negotiate the contracts. They have the power to fix it. They must act before asking Vermonters to accept the dismantling of local school governance.

Signed,

Essex Westford School District School Board Advocacy Committee

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