Testimony by Deborah Singiser
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Before the Senate Committee on Education

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Good afternoon, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the draft map that your committee is considering.

My name is Debbie Singiser, and I am a school board member who has served on a district board within the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union for eight years. I am here to speak specifically to the **governance** implications of your proposed redistricting map. I will leave the discussion of operations to superintendents, who are better positioned to speak to those matters. My focus will be on **governance**, and it is from that perspective that I ask you to consider what I have observed firsthand.

I support all six goals in the legislation that accompanies the map. However, I would like to focus my testimony on goal #1, improving governance efficiency, and goal #2 enabling higher quality educational delivery. I believe the way we accomplish these two goals is by moving our state **away from the Supervisory Union model** and **toward Supervisory Districts**. I believe this change would result in more efficient, more equitable, and more responsive governance for Vermont's students, families, and communities. Here's why.

The first problem with Supervisory Union governance is budgeting.

I would like to give you a current example to illustrate one of the problems with the Supervisory Union model that is happening right now in RNESU, which is composed of two unified union school districts: Barstow and Otter Valley.

This year, the FY27 Barstow Unified Union School District budget passed when voters went to the polls on Town Meeting Day. Unfortunately, however, the Otter Valley Unified Union School District budget failed. In a Supervisory Union structure, when one district's budget fails, that board's options are severely constrained. Because Barstow voters had already officially adopted the shared budget — which includes the central office budget — Otter Valley's board had no ability to revisit or reduce any central office expenses. Those figures were locked in.

Otter Valley's board was therefore limited to making cuts only within their own district budget. And that is precisely what happened earlier this week: in order to reduce costs, their board eliminated student-facing positions — a global language teacher and a portion of an academic coach. These are direct cuts to student programming. Students in Otter Valley UUSD will bear the consequences of a governance structure that tied their board's hands. As an aside — and I say this not rhetorically but genuinely — I find it hard to reconcile our obligation to prepare

students for “citizenship in a global society” with a governance structure that makes a global language teacher one of the first casualties of a failed budget.

This is not a hypothetical. It is happening now, in our SU, this budget cycle.

In a Supervisory District, this situation would be handled differently. All voters across all member towns vote on a single, unified budget. That budget either passes or fails as a whole. If it fails, the board reconvenes to deliberate across the full budget — including central office costs — and returns to voters with a revised proposal. No single community is left bearing the burden of cuts alone, and no board is prevented from considering the full picture.

There is a second governance concern with the Supervisory Union model I want to raise, and that is superintendent capacity.

In a Supervisory Union, a superintendent is required to attend multiple district board meetings — presenting similar reports, sharing the same information, and fulfilling the same functions repeatedly across separate boards. I am not a proponent of repeating the same task multiple times when once will do. This is an inefficient use of one of our most valuable educational resources: our superintendents.

While a superintendent must attend to governance, they are first and foremost the CEO of their district — responsible for a wide range of daily operational demands. When that superintendent is preparing for and attending multiple board meetings each month, governance begins to cannibalize the time that should be spent on operations, including the instructional leadership that directly benefits students.

A superintendent operating within a **Supervisory District** attends fewer board meetings and has greater capacity to serve as an instructional leader — in classrooms, in schools, and in the community. That is where we want our educational leaders spending their time. A Supervisory District structure makes that possible in a way that a Supervisory Union does not.

<u>On School Choice: Guardrails, Not Elimination</u>

I am aware that one argument made for retaining Supervisory Unions is the continuation of school choice, that is, paying tuition on the students’ behalf to attend a school of their choice. I want to address this issue directly.

I am **not** opposed to school choice. But, I am concerned about how it is currently functioning. And, protecting school choice in its current form should not come at the cost of better, more efficient governance.

As chair of the Barstow Unified Union School District Board, I watched a trend emerge in our district. Over the course of five years, we paid 122 school tuitions to independent schools — and only half were for students who graduated from Barstow's eighth grade. Independent school enrollment among our high school students climbed from 16% in FY21 to 35% in FY25. At one independent school alone, Killington Mountain School, we tuitioned 13 students in a single year, 10 of whom had never attended Barstow. Local taxpayers are increasingly funding education for students with limited or only temporary ties to our community.

This is not a sustainable or equitable use of public education dollars. School choice, as currently structured, is creating challenges to our ability to plan, budget, and deliver a strong public education for the students who **are** genuinely rooted in our communities, those attending Barstow School.

I urge this Committee to consider establishing guardrails around school choice — such as, limiting public tuition payments to public schools, or, requiring that tuitions for independent schools be available **only** to students who have attended a school in the tuitioning district for a defined period of time. What we should not do is perpetuate inefficient governance structures in order to preserve a school choice system that, itself, needs reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the proposed map before you presents a wonderful opportunity to transform how Vermont governs its public schools. I respectfully urge this Committee to move toward a Supervisory District model statewide — one that gives all communities an equal voice in budget decisions, uses superintendent time and leadership more effectively, and does not leave any single district's students bearing the consequences of an inefficient governance structure.

Thank you for your time, and your service to Vermont's students.