My name is Nathan Pickard, and I am your boots on the ground, reporting to you today on the smoke and mirrors that are not being shared with legislators. I come to you as a career first responder who has risen to the rank of Chief, as an Emergency Management Director who recently created Vermont State University's Emergency Operations Plan, as someone who has directly responded to major incidents, and as a former ongoing worker with the Department for Children and Families. I have stood in living rooms with families on the edge, in classrooms where kids arrive hungry and overwhelmed, and in command posts where we try to make broken systems talk to each other during a crisis. From that vantage point, I can tell you: the way we are restructuring education under Act 73 does not yet match the reality Vermonters are living every day.

Right now, we are paying a premium for fragmentation. Every district runs different technology platforms, different data systems, different contracts, and different pathways into Vermont State University, Community College of Vermont, and workforce training. That is not just inefficient; it confuses families and students and wastes money we desperately need for direct services. When you hear promises of savings from consolidating districts and eliminating local boards, understand that the real savings are in consolidating systems and aligning our pipelines, not in hollowing out local schools.

On the ground, schools have become food pantries, crisis centers, and mentalhealth triage. Teachers are making sure kids have breakfast, winter clothes, and someone to talk to before they can even begin a lesson. Children are carrying the weight of housing instability, addiction in their families, and a financial climate that leaves parents choosing between heat, rent, and food. We talk about test scores and "accountability," but we are asking traumatized kids to learn in a constant state of crisis. That is not a failure of our educators; it is a failure of the systems we have built around them.

We also need to ask a question that almost no one is asking out loud: why are so many of our children on IEPs, and why does that percentage vary so dramatically from one part of the state to another? If disability were the only explanation, the numbers would not swing so widely by geography. Those differences tell us that trauma, poverty, inconsistent expectations, and fragmented systems are driving some of these identifications. In some communities, an IEP has become the only way to access support. In others, kids with similar needs are left to struggle without any plan at all. That is not equity; that is a patchwork.

We have spent years talking about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as if a training or a slogan could fix this. What we need now is Unity, Equity, and Inclusion. Unity means aligning our systems from kindergarten through 12th grade, through Vermont State University and CCV, and into the workforce and reentry. Equity means making sure every child's basic needs—food, water, safety, and mentalhealth support—are met so

they are actually ready to learn, and that supports like IEPs are used consistently and fairly across the state, not as a substitute for a coherent system. Inclusion means that Vermonters who have been incarcerated are not written off, but intentionally brought back into our communities and our workforce with real educational pathways.

We already have proof that alignment works. Vermont State University has begun to turn the corner by aligning its programs with real workforce needs and clarifying pathways from CCV. We see similar promise in corrections education and reentry programs that give people a chance to earn credentials and step into work instead of cycling back into the system. But these successes are happening in spite of fragmentation in K–12, not because of a coherent statewide design.

When I talk about regionalization, I am not talking about erasing local identity; I am talking about aligning and sharing the work that can be done once, well, across a region. We should be regionalizing IT, business offices, transportation, and specialized services, while preserving real local voice over school climate, trauma response, and community partnerships. In emergency management, including my work creating Vermont State University's Emergency Operations Plan and responding to major incidents, I have seen what happens when systems are aligned and when they are not. When they line up, we can turn a crisis into a turning point. When they don't, families fall through the cracks and the costs—human and financial—are much higher.

So my message to you is simple: do not be distracted by the smoke and mirrors of quick fixes and paper savings. If Act 73 is going to transform education, then use it to regionalize and align our systems—from K–12 through higher education and reentry—while protecting and empowering the local relationships that kids and families rely on. Invest the savings from system consolidation back into basicneeds supports and mentalhealth services in schools. Build clear, guaranteed pathways into VTSU, CCV, apprenticeships, and reentry programs in every region. And insist on a transparent, statewide look at why our IEP numbers are so high, why they vary so much by district, and how we can reduce preventable disability by addressing trauma, poverty, and system failure upstream.

Lastly, I have to ask a hard question: why is our current administration not putting these solutions on the table for you? Why are we not hearing about regionalizing systems, aligning K–12 with Vermont State University, CCV, and corrections education, confronting the disparities in IEP identification, and reinvesting savings into basicneeds supports in schools—instead of just hearing proposals to shut down or hollow out our local schools? Vermonters deserve more than a choice between higher taxes and fewer schools. We deserve a plan that is honest about the problems, specific about the solutions, and serious about unifying our education system from early childhood through reentry.

Vermonters are not afraid of change. What we fear is being asked to sacrifice our communities for someone else's spreadsheet. I am asking you, as someone who has spent his career on the front lines, to look past the talking points, see what is really happening in our schools and homes, and use this moment to build a unified, equitable, and inclusive system that actually works for the people you serve.