

**To:** Chairs Conlon, Bongartz, and Kornheiser; Members of the House and Senate Committees on Education and House Committee on Ways & Means **CC:** Rep. Tagliavia and Sen. Benson; Committee Assistants

Dear Representatives and Senators,

The Waits River Valley School Board, representing **Corinth and Topsham**, has reviewed the evolving redistricting proposals under Act 73. While we share the goal of a sustainable educational system, the current proposals of the House and Senate Education Committees threaten to disenfranchise our students, disregard geographical logic, and dismantle decades of highly successful partnerships, with no evidence this upheaval will do anything to reduce costs or increase educational quality and equity. We strongly oppose any solutions that eliminate our historical access to choice and ask you to incorporate the considerations and suggestions below as you proceed.

### Steady Enrollment and Fiscal Prudence

**The Waits River Valley School (WRVS) district has not experienced the double-digit tax increases or the enrollment declines** that have fueled the imperative to redistrict. Our fiscal stability is the result of years of disciplined, lean budgeting, which also means our students forgo some of the extras of wealthier communities. For our families, **high school choice** is the other side of the coin, providing the first chance for students to explore their interests in a broader playing field.

In 2025, 50 of our 129 high schoolers attended Thetford Academy with 45 attending Oxbow High School, and the rest attending a dozen other mostly public schools or historic academies (e.g., Spaulding HS, Blue Mountain Union, Saint Johnsbury Academy, Union-32, and Hanover HS). For decades, families in our community have been able to avail themselves of all these choices as they weighed what best met the needs of their children and/or their work commutes to any of the surrounding towns.

**We ask that you do not solve problems created or experienced by other communities at the expense of our students – specifically, please do not remove, limit, or otherwise jeopardize their access to choice.**

### Response to Current Maps and Language

Neither of the primary maps currently on the table reflect the reality of life in Orange County.

- **Conlon Map:** This proposal groups us in “District 12” with towns as far north as Walden and Waterford. We share little to no geographic or cultural alignment with these communities. We are, by contrast, inextricably linked to many of the towns of District 11 (e.g., Thetford, Chelsea) by county lines, commuting patterns and geography.

Further, initial proposed language to accompany the map (“[Elizabeth St. James: Proposed Designation Contract Language - draft 1.1](#)”) would essentially force Corinth and Topsham students to lose all choice and likely require them to only attend Oxbow High School. We are very opposed to this map in tandem with the draft 1.1 language.

- **Bongartz Map:** Like the Conlon map, this map isolates Corinth, Topsham, and Bradford in the “Central Area SU” away from other neighbors. This grouping also appears to marginalize towns with lower wealth and less representation.

### Map and Language Alternatives

As a first line of defense, we ask you to keep the OESU towns (Bradford, Newbury, Corinth, Groton, Ryegate, Thetford, and Topsham) together. We also ask you to add language that ensures continued access to high school choice for Corinth and Topsham students, regardless of the boundaries that are drawn.

- As the current map proposals have been framed as “just a starting point,” we suggest you **consider instead a district including Bradford, Newbury, Corinth, Groton, Ryegate, Thetford, and Topsham, plus Orange, Washington, Chelsea, Tunbridge, Sharon, and Strafford.** This configuration serves approximately 2,933 students, hitting your target size while maintaining geographic and educational cohesion. Another option would be to use the Orange County boundary (3,624 students with Rivendell subtracted).
- Act 73 was a compromise. **It pared down the list of schools eligible to receive tuition but left historic choice towns with the ability to continue to tuition to public schools or approved independent schools that met certain conditions (§ 828).** Now, the legislature appears to want to change this arrangement. This is unfair and deeply destabilizing to our community. **The legislature must keep its bargain and retain the Act 73 § 828 language,** which would allow Corinth and Topsham to continue to be able to send our high school students to schools of choice, regardless of whatever maps and governance structures are ultimately selected.
- While we urge an alternative map and the maintenance of current Act 73 language, **we believe the language in “[Elizabeth St. James: Proposed School Designation Contract Language - draft 2.1](#)” holds potential** – provided it guarantees continued access to **CHOICE** for Corinth and Topsham students **regardless of the respective districts** in which the towns are ultimately placed. We would urge the addition of language that guarantees **any public or independent school that has served at least 20% of a town's high school population in the last year be automatically designated as an eligible choice** for towns that have historically tuitioned their high schoolers.
- We support the intent of the language in “[Proposed Enrollment Attendance Zone-School Choice Policies Language, Draft 1.3,](#)” introduced March 13, to continue to allow choice in historic choice communities as it existed on July 1, 2026, as long as it:
  - Includes approved independent schools.
  - Does not restrict attendance to public or approved independent schools located within the same SU/SD as the sending school (i.e., require policies allow both inter- and intra-district choice, to reflect current attendance patterns).
  - Ensures any school choice policy does not add new restrictions to the choices that have been historically available to students and their families, such as through applications and lotteries.

We understand the pressure the legislature is under to “draw maps,” but we ask respectfully that you decline to take any action that will harm students, families, and educational outcomes without any commensurate benefit. The evidence does not appear to support a conclusion that reforming

governance through redistricting and eliminating choice will address the root causes of cost increases (e.g. and primarily, relentless increases in staff health insurance costs). It will not solve student enrollment declines, nor will it improve educational outcomes. And the aggressive timeline, **especially if paired with loss of access to high school choice**, will be especially harmful to current middle schoolers, who already endured the brunt of the destabilization of the Covid years at the beginning of their K-12 journey.

Thank you for your hard work. We are available to collaborate, provide feedback and testimony as the discussion continues, and we ask that you consider and include us in your decision-making.

Sincerely,

**The Waits River Valley School Board** *Representing the Towns of Corinth and Topsham*