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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 A different path

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#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

2 Members of the School District Redistricting Task Force  
3 took strong stands: against forced mergers of school districts and  
4 supervisory unions, and for protecting rural elementary schools  
5 and keeping them close by

#####END SUBHED#####

6 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

7 WE AT THE Rural School Community Alliance (RSCA)  
8 commend the leadership and members of the Act 73 Redistricting  
9 Task Force for their principled, evidence-driven approach to the  
10 work assigned by the Vermont Legislature.

11 On Nov. 10, the Task Force voted to send a proposal  
12 forward to the Legislature that calls for voluntary, cooperative  
13 agreements that create real cost savings, protect rural schools,  
14 maintain Vermont's quality of life, and preserve democracy at the  
15 community level.

16 Notably, the Task Force has committed to a democratic,  
17 community-driven approach to redistricting Vermont's schools,  
18 one that trusts local decision-making at the community level  
19 rather than imposing top-down mandates.

20 Its members took a strong stand against forced mergers of  
21 existing school districts and supervisory unions and an equally  
22 strong stand in support of protecting rural elementary schools and  
23 keeping them close to the children they serve.

24 The Task Force also proposed a thoughtful, cost-effective  
25 framework for communities to explore larger regional and  
26 comprehensive high schools, paired where feasible with  
27 Community and Technical Education Centers.

28 This approach is grounded in the evidence and will  
29 reduce costs while increasing opportunities for older students.  
30 The Task Force's recommendations reflect hours of deliberation,  
31 review of research, and careful listening to the public.

32 \* \* \*

33 WITH MORE THAN 5,000 Vermonters engaging through  
34 surveys, meetings and public comment, the overwhelming  
35 conclusion was clear: Forced mergers will not reduce costs or  
36 property taxes and would have negative impacts on our  
37 communities and children.

38 Vermonters want solutions that protect local schools and  
39 make education more affordable. The Task Force listened. Its  
40 proposal affirms that communities, working collaboratively with  
41 local school boards, are best positioned to lower costs while  
42 maintaining the quality and character of Vermont's public  
43 education system.

44 Task Force members openly questioned the assumption  
45 that "simply consolidating is going to save the state money" —

46 and their concern is strongly supported by the research. And  
47 much would be lost in the process.

48 The Rural School Community Alliance supports that  
49 view. In a position statement sent to the Task Force in July, the  
50 RSCA stated, "there are no clear and consistent economic  
51 benefits from creating mega-districts that dissolve local ties."

52 Neither per-pupil spending data nor qualitative evidence  
53 shows that school closures or consolidations reduce costs. When  
54 increased transportation costs, maintenance of empty buildings,  
55 costs for expanding infrastructure, and reduced property values  
56 are accounted for, the evidence is even clearer: Consolidation  
57 does not deliver savings and, therefore, does not reduce property  
58 taxes. Voluntary collaboration, however, consistently does.

59 \* \* \*

60 AFTER REVIEWING this and other evidence, the Task Force  
61 concluded that the most effective path for reducing costs now  
62 and in the future is the creation of cooperative educational  
63 services districts.

64 This shared-services model, used successfully across the  
65 United States, especially in rural states, has already begun to  
66 show results in Vermont. Seven supervisory unions and one large  
67 school district in southern Vermont have signed agreements to  
68 form such a system.

69 As chair of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union  
70 Board, one of the cooperating districts, I can report that we are  
71 already seeing savings that will ultimately help relieve pressure  
72 on local property tax rates.

73 The Act 73 Redistricting Task Force recognizes that  
74 closing small schools and creating mega-school districts will not  
75 solve Vermont's rising education costs. Instead, its members are  
76 poised to ask the Legislature to support strategies that actually  
77 reduce spending, and therefore cut property taxes, without  
78 destroying the character and quality of Vermont's entire education  
79 system in the process.

80 On behalf of the members of the Rural School  
81 Community Alliance, representing more than 100 towns and  
82 villages, we urge the public to contact your senators and  
83 representatives and support the Task Force's recommendation for  
84 voluntary, cooperative agreements that will deliver cost savings,  
85 protect rural schools, and preserve local control.

86 And while you are reaching out, please thank the Task  
87 Force members for their courage, clarity, and commitment to  
88 Vermont's shared values.

#####END TEXT#####

BIO/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

89 **CHERYL CHARLES, PH.D.** chairs the Westminster Town  
90 School District Board, the Windham Northeast Supervisory  
91 Union Board, and the Steering Committee for the Rural School  
92 Community Alliance.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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