

## TIME TO HIT THE PAUSE BUTTON ON SCHOOL DISTRICT CENTRALIZATION

Presentation to the Vermont State Board of Education, September 20, 2016

Re: Merger Proposal – Addison Northeast Supervisory Union

Good afternoon. I am a member of the Addison Northeast Supervisory Union Act 46 Study Committee. Together with Mike Fisher and Nancy Cornell, we have filed a Minority Report in opposition to the Proposed Merger which is before this Board for consideration today. I would like to offer some brief comments explaining why we believe the Proposed Merger is not in the best interests of our children's education.

When Act 46 was enacted in 2015, I was very happy and optimistic about its core goals, which assumed that consolidating school districts would result in statewide equity and quality improvements, and that greater operational efficiencies would have a positive impact on our property taxes. I was also encouraged by flexibility language in the statute that acknowledged that a one-size fits all approach may not be possible or the best governance model in all regions of the state.

Unfortunately, the message that is being communicated to the local level is that officials in Montpelier have a single, "one-size-fits-all" design for school governance. Local districts are under significant pressure to adopt the "preferred" model, whether or not the facts and circumstances relevant to their communities support Montpelier's preference.

School district centralization may be a positive choice in some communities. In the towns of Bristol, Lincoln, Monkton, New Haven and Starksboro, however, the facts do not support this approach:

- School district centralization will not have a significant impact on property taxes.

It would be wonderful if the solution to high property taxes were as simple as centralizing our school districts. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to remedy this difficult and long-standing problem. The Proposed Merger Report identifies annual cost savings of only \$140,237, compared to annual education spending of over \$24 million. Most estimated "savings" are not real cost reductions, but rather reflect tax incentives which must be paid for by other taxes, and which will disappear after four years. If real cost savings are not realized when the tax incentives end, property taxes will need to be increased.

- School district centralization is unlikely to have a significant impact on education quality.

My sense is that families in our community are not terribly concerned about any quality differences between our five elementary schools. What is a greater concern concerns is that the elementary and high schools to the north of us, in Chittenden County, seem to provide higher quality and variety of educational programs than are offered to our students. Improvements in educational quality may more likely occur through existing efforts by educational leaders and teachers, but not because of school district centralization.

While the potential benefits of school district centralization are minimal, the Proposed Merger may cause demonstrable harm to our children's education:

- School district centralization will weaken the school – community relationship.

The school – community relationship is an essential element of an educational system that works well for students. This relationship helps to keep schools close to students and parents, and is more likely to assure strong financial support when school budgets are voted on. Of particular importance in our community, local school boards and school-based parent

organizations were an important factor in addressing recent community concerns with how a former Superintendent was administering and centralizing control over our schools.

- School district centralization may hinder the process of hiring the best teachers.

School district centralization will diminish the authority that school principals, school search committees, and the superintendent have, when deciding what teachers to hire. This change could occur because, in becoming one school district instead of six, the contract rules about Reductions in Force and employee Recall Rights could become applicable across all schools, instead of within each school. A teacher in one school that is reducing the number of staff, could “bump” a less senior teacher, in another school, out of a job – without regard for which teacher is the best fit for the position. By far, the most important decision we make in schools is who we hire to work with kids. The likelihood that consolidation could diminish a local school’s hiring options seems too great a risk.

- School budgets are less likely to receive the scrutiny that taxpayers deserve.

With school district centralization, there will be one budget for all 5 elementary schools and the middle and high school, as well as the superintendent’s office. Decisions about everything from budgets to staffing will be centralized – handled by the superintendent, and the single 13-member unified district board. There will be less opportunity for residents to address the good or the bad of specific school budgets and educational performance. There would no longer be an option for towns to debate and amend their community school budgets at an annual school town meeting, as voters currently do in Starksboro and in Lincoln. The structure being proposed seems likely to decrease, rather than increase transparency and accountability, two of the main goals of Act 46.

For the residents and students of the Addison Northeast community, it is time to hit the pause button on a school district merger proposal that will not achieve the promises made in Act 46, and that may cause real harm to our children’s education.

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