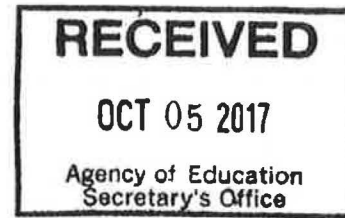


September 27, 2017

Vermont State Board of Education
Krista Huling, Chair
care of:
Vermont Agency of Education
Secretary Rebecca Holcombe
219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, VT 05641



Dear Ms. Huling and Board Members

We have had the opportunity to review the video of your latest meeting wherein the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union Study Committee and administration's delegation presented its merger draft for your approval.

Watching the video was extremely distressing. The lack of honesty and the ad-hominum attacks on those who see things differently, particularly from those who are bearers of a public trust, were particularly troubling. Lest you dismiss this as another disgruntled objection to Act 46, please know that it comes from a large group of citizens who have been working hard to accomplish the goals of the Act in our district.

Contrary to what was represented to the board, there has been virtually no opportunity for public participation in the Study Committee's process. There have been brief token periods at the outset or end of the meetings for public comments, most of which (as is clear in the video record) were studiously ignored. The Administration and Study Committee have been clear from the outset that putting together articles for a merger was the committee's work, and that it intended to carry out that work on its own. Unlike in many other districts, there was no consultant hired to assist with a community process and dialog and with helping with understanding the variety of ways to work with the act. Indeed, the notion of greater community input or participation, which has been robust in other districts, was rejected in favor of an insular, bulldozer-like approach, in which discussion was with the committee's lawyer and with Montpelier, but not with people who live in the communities involved. To the extent that there has been communication with the greater public, it has been primarily been one-way, with the committee and administration presenting its work.

The committee was clear as well that it was unwilling to consider any other options than a full merger; options that might (or might not) better meet the needs of the children in the region were off the table.

In addition, the characterization of those who disagree with the committee as being more focused on adult needs than the needs of our children is at best absurd and disrespectful, and at worst disgraceful. Reasonable people can disagree, and one hopes, in a democracy, that all voices will be respected. To wrap oneself in the flag of "I'm the one who cares most about the children, and if you challenge me then you do not" is an old and tired stance and ultimately is simple demagoguery. The study committee and central office administration could just as easily be accused of putting an obvious power grab before of the needs of the students. Rather, it is likely that they believe that what they are proposing is better for students.

When you get all your information from one source your understanding will be limited. When the State Board of Education gets its information only from administrators and study committees then it gets a somewhat warped view. Despite what was presented, many of those who are looking at other solutions

in addition to considering a merger, support the goals of the Act and are deeply committed to the well-being of the students of the WSESU. Many are educators who have devoted their lives to working with children. Their stance comes from a deeply held belief – supported by their own experience and a substantial body of research – that children fare best in caring environments; environments where their local communities have and feel a stake in their well-being and involve themselves in their lives. No-where is this adult commitment to children's nurturance and growth better seen, encouraged, and expressed than in a community's school – with the emphasis on “community's.” The deeper and more local the community's ownership (in the various senses of the term) of the school and its operation, the closer, deeper, and more more clearly felt (by those children) that caring is; children who come from such environments develop a confidence and resiliency that are fundamental building blocks and precursors of well-being later in life.

You, or our administrators or study committee may disagree, which is fine. That should not be taken to mean that you care more for your adult agenda than you do for the well-being of children.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the conduct of the committee has created substantial divisiveness in a larger region which has had a remarkable history of cooperation on all levels of the educational process. Indeed that very divisiveness is reflected in the comments discussed above. Rather than treat other points of view as just that, they are treated, and described, as 'opposition,' as 'nay saying,' as 'a refusal to accept to Act 46,' as having 'other agendas,' and as personal attacks. Sadly, despite outright pleas not to create such polarization and bad feeling, the committee has done just that. (In addition, your board had the option, on hearing about the 'opposition,' to question the process engaged upon by the committee or to encourage greater participation. Instead the attitude reflected in the comment that there's opposition, so “you have your work cut out for you” just encourages that very polarization.) Whatever the outcome, it will take years to heal. And yet again, kids getting what they need will be the less for it.

Thank you for your attention. Respectfully,

Ahren Ahrenholz
Akara Draper
Andy Davis
Anne Fines
Asher Puciareello
Bill Schmidt
Bruce Sterling
Carol Schnabel
Carrie Ritson
Dan Normandeau

David Major
David Schoales
Edith Gould
Elan Moses
Elinore Towle
Elizabeth Adams
Gail Sorenson
George Carvill
Jody Normandeau
Judy Davidson

Julia Forsyth
Kelt Naylor
Ken Mccaffrey
Linnie Jones
Lisa Adams
Luke Euphrat
Mary Ellen Copeland
Michael Wilmott
Mike Mrowicki
Nancy Detra

Paul Normandeau
Peter Hetzel
Reed Miller
Richard Virkstis
Steve Meggiolaro
Steve Redmond
Susan Meggiolaro
Susan Wilmott
Thomas Ehrenberg
Virginia Bunker

Notes re signatories: There are many others who have been active in working with alternatives to merger whose names are not on this list; this list includes people from across the WSESU (and a few from surrounding towns); some school board members or town officials who have been active did not feel they could sign.

cc.:

Governor Phil Scott
Rebecca Holcomb, Secretary of Education
Donna Russo Savage, Assistant to the Secretary
WSESU Study Committee
Lyle Holiday, Superintendent, WSESU