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May 1, 2020

To: John Carroll, Vermont State Board of Education, Chair  
Dan French, Vermont Secretary of Education

In follow-up to the State Board of Education memo dated April 22, 2020 regarding the boundaries of the current Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU) to include Arlington School District and Sandgate School District with the effective date of July 1, 2021, we respectfully submit the following details regarding this matter and ask for your reconsideration of the original timeline.

As set forth in the Secretary's recommendation from November 2018, it was cited that the SVSU was in a better position to begin working toward SU boundary changes. In conversations with the SVSU over the past year, it has become clear that the district merger for the Southwest Vermont Union Elementary District has required considerable work for the SVSU staff. They are not yet able to realize the anticipated efficiencies, nor do they have the capacity to take on two additional districts in the current SU structure. We have had on-going conversations with the SVSU and have designated members who would serve on the SVSU Board. However, with input from the SVSU Superintendent and Board Chair, we were informed that participating in those meetings prior to August 2020 would have been premature, as the focus of their on-going work has been the forced elementary school merger and resulting program and budget changes for the member districts.

In a March 2020 phone conversation with Secretary French and Donna Russo-Savage, members of the Arlington School District board had discussed the possibility of requesting additional time for the transition to the SVSU. Based on that conversation, we felt it would be a realistic request to make if there was support from all impacted boards and districts. In follow-up to that call we had prepared to submit that request to the State Board of Education, but unfortunately these plans were impacted by the sudden closure of school buildings and cancellation of board meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With all that has surfaced in the past 30 – 45 days, we are all facing a global public-health crisis and sudden change to the educational landscape, which impacts priorities and challenges for all schools. The ripple effect of this health and economic challenge is not yet known. To redirect any time or resources to a governance and structural change would likely have a negative effect on educational opportunities in the impacted districts. At the state and local level, all major program, governance, and legislative changes are being carefully considered and, in most instances, postponed, allowing schools to focus on their current, evolving priorities. In the April 22<sup>nd</sup> memo it was stated that the State Board was concerned that "further delay in moving toward a merged SU may impact the education provided to students in the region." It is hard to see, given the current state-wide issues regarding education in this world crisis, how education would be negatively impacted by a delay in governance changes. In fact, we believe the opposite is true: Any major changes that would take the focus off meeting the educational needs of students would have a far greater detrimental effect on education in the region. All resources within the school systems are focused on how to deliver education in a completely remote platform and boards/ SU staff are going to have to address the financial impact from this situation.

It should be noted that during this past year, the Arlington School District has made strides toward greater stability in student enrollment and financial planning for the district. This work, in conjunction with the efficiencies gained within the BVSU over the past few years, have allowed the Arlington School District to realize some of the

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educational goals that had been previously identified as possible areas of vulnerability by the Secretary of Education. The Arlington School Board and Administrative teams are developing 5-year strategic plans to ensure the growth and sustainability of our schools with increased total student count in the upcoming year(s), specifically focused on an increase in tuition students for AMHS. A transition to a SU structure that is not yet stable is likely to impede the progress that we have made in this past year and impact our ability to deliver exceptional educational offerings to our students.

The Boards of Directors for the Arlington and Sandgate School Districts understand that the structure within the BVSU does not position our districts to realize economies of scale that could be possible within a larger SU structure. However, the move to the SVSU under the present timeline would not afford greater convenience or economy for any of the districts impacted by this proposed change. We ask the State Board of Education to delay the decision to enlarge the SVSU boundaries to target an operational date no sooner than July 1, 2022. An additional year for this transition will allow for all current member districts within the SVSU to begin to see operational efficiencies as outlined in Act 46 and for the SVSU to determine the leadership structure necessary to take on additional districts.

Additionally, as district mergers throughout the region and the state become more stable and the full scope of the financial impact of this pandemic become evident, it is possible that alternate governance models would become a topic to be addressed by the State Board. If more comprehensive SU boundary adjustments are considered, or an alternate placement for Arlington and Sandgate would better meet the needs for public education in the area, we would request an opportunity to address that topic with the State Board and/ or Secretary of Education prior to the approved effective date for the SVSU boundary changes.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeanne Zoppel, Sandgate School District Board Chair

Todd Wilkins, Arlington School District Board Chair

Kathleen James, Vermont State Representative, Member House Education Committee