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Subject: Your July 20 Meeting with the Merger Study Committee of MAUSD/ANWSD

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Dear Members of the State Board of Education,

I am writing to you in regard to your meeting tomorrow with the Merger Study Committee of MAUSD and ANWSD. I am a resident of Starksboro, a retired special education teacher, and a member of the Starksboro Save Our Schools committee. I care deeply about keeping our gem of a school within our community, as long as it is a school that works well for our students, both the disadvantaged and more advantaged.

I understand your concern about the possible instability of school districts within Addison County. I'd like to propose that there is a very simple and straightforward way of ensuring continued stability. That is to require that the Merger Study Committee include within its articles, protection for member town schools similar to those that currently exist in our articles of agreement with MAUSD and that the MAUSD board recently reaffirmed by its definition of closure (as opposed to repurposing a school).

On May 10 of this year the town of Starksboro voted almost unanimously in favor of the following two articles:

Article 1. Shall the legal voters of the Town of Starksboro, Vermont withdraw its membership in the Mount Abraham Unified Union School District and be reconstituted as the Starksboro town school district.

Article 2. Shall the Select Board of the Town of Starksboro be authorized to terminate the withdrawal process commenced by an affirmative vote on Article 1, above, if either of the following two conditions are satisfied:

Condition #1. The Merger Study Committee (formed by the Addison Northwest School District and Mount Abraham Unified Union School District) includes in expressly warned Articles of Agreement a statement in substantially the following form:

"A town elementary school program shall not be closed, repurposed or otherwise terminated for any students in each of the grades K through 6 resident in the town without the approval of the voters of the town."

OR

Condition #2. The proposed merger of the Addison Northwest School District and Mount Abraham Unified Union School District is not approved by the voters.

As members of the State Board of Education, you could require that the Merger Study Committee change Article 14B to include wording substantially similar to our first condition:

“A town elementary school program shall not be closed, repurposed or otherwise terminated for any students in each of the grades K through 6 resident in the town without the approval of the voters of the town.”

If this is done, our select board is authorized to terminate the withdrawal process. Over many, many meetings of the MSC several members of the committee advocated for this language. They also warned repeatedly that they did not think the merger would pass if it did not include this language. Dave Sharpe, who was our state rep a few years ago and who was instrumental in crafting and passing Act 46, was one of the members who repeatedly suggested this change. He and others who did so were ignored and their recommendations were not followed by any significant discussion. Dave Sharpe and certain other members of the MSC have since resigned from the committee over their frustration with the way in which their concerns were consistently ignored.

I urge you to insist that the MSC include in its articles of agreement language that restores the vote of each town for grades K-6 before school closure. The current wording in the MSC articles would not protect Starksboro, given our small population relative to the size of towns such as Bristol and Vergennes, which may not fully understand the value of a good community school for a small town, the value of an involved and caring community for elementary school children, and the value of small rural towns for Vermont as a whole. Merger Study Committee members have repeatedly maintained that citizens of small towns are “too emotional” to judge when their schools need to be school. My experience is that local residents have very clear-eyed perspectives, because they know their school well and want the best for their children.

I hope you will require this simple and equitable solution to the current divisions within the school districts of Addison County, where we all, at heart, want the best education for our children.

Thank you,
Marguerite Gregory, MEd