



# Windham Northeast Supervisory Union

*Creating an Inclusive Community through Personalized Student Engagement.*

Athens Grafton Rockingham Westminister

Dear Mr. Carroll and members of the SBE:

Thank you for your guidance letter of April 8. Please consider this our official response to your request for information regarding item F in that letter.

In your letter you state:

*"The State Board requests that the person(s) having legal authority to speak on behalf of the WNUESD's voters living in Athens and Grafton provide to the Board a written response to the question of whether the State Board should affirm or dissolve a two-member union school district. "*

We struggled to understand the meaning of the phrase "legal authority to speak on this matter." by the two towns. We were unsure by whom this would be granted. In order to ensure that we have properly complied to this request, this letter is jointly signed by the following individuals:

- John V. "Jack" Bryar who is a Grafton resident, is the Chair of The WNUESD, and who has been elected at large by the Grafton and Athens community. Each year he has prepared and distributed to the electorate of his district a report of the conditions and needs of the district school system, per 16 V.S.A. § 563, he has also led the school operation of the annual pretown meeting segments in Grafton and Athens for many years. He was also asked to speak before the SBE in the matter of the original consolidation proposal before the SBE.
- Hardy Merrill, who is a Grafton resident and a well-known expert in financial matters who has advised the town of Grafton for years. In his position as Chair of the Grafton Educational Advisory Commission of the Grafton Select Board, he was authorized to prepare materials used by the citizens of Grafton in the recent referendum to determine whether it was in the best interest of Grafton to allow Westminister to separate from the rest of the WNUESD.
- Donald Capponcelli, who is a resident of Athens and a former BFUHS Board representative for Athens, and known for his facilities expertise. He acted as Chair of the Athens Educational Advisory Commission and prepared materials used by the citizens of Athens in the recent referendum on whether to allow Westminister to separate from the rest of the WNUESD.
- Jessica Westclark, who is a Grafton resident and a member of the WNUESD School Board who has been elected at large by the Grafton and Athens community. Ms. Westclark has also served as a WNUESD representative on the Board of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union.
- Lynn Morgan, who is an Athens resident, Clerk of the WNUESD and a member of the WNUESD School Board who has been elected at large by the Grafton and Athens community. Ms. Morgan has also served as a WNUESD representative on the Board of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union.
- Virginia Maciejowski, who is an Athens resident, and a member of the WNUESD School Board



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It is our position that all those named above have standing to speak on educational matters for their communities— a standing granted by the voters of the district and the elected bodies of their individual communities. Further, the members of the WNUESD Board listed above constitute a majority of that body and this letter should serve as an official granting of authority to the Grafton and Athens individuals named above to speak on behalf of their communities. If you wish further confirmation by votes of the Grafton and Athens select boards, please let us know, so that we can provide you these items in time for your meeting.

At present, we anticipate that Mr. Bryar will act as principal spokesperson for Athens and Grafton, and he will be available for all meetings by the SBE and will prepare to answer any questions. At the time of the meeting he may ask at least two other members of those mentioned above, at least one of which will be from Athens, to accompany him at the electronic meeting, and speak, unless there is an objection. He also may request to ask advice from legal counsel in the unlikely event this is necessary.

Let us know if that is acceptable.

## To the question in item F:

The towns of Athens and Grafton wish to be clear that we are not asking the SBE to dissolve the WNUESD and feel strongly that such a move would be add unnecessary uncertainty and be adverse to the interests of our communities for the following reasons:

- Members of the WNUESD are not petitioning for a dissolution.

At this time there has been no petition to separate the two communities back into individual town districts. There has been no motion by any official or unofficial body in either Grafton or Athens to consider the separation of either town from the other or to dissolve the present district. All that is being sought is the right to act on the stated provisions of the Interim Articles approved by the SBE, namely the right of the WNUESD to add members or to allow a member town to withdraw. While it is theoretically possible that, in the distant future, the member towns may come before the SBE looking to reconfigure their district or even seeking its dissolution there is absolutely no movement in our communities to do so at this time. There seems little point in granting something not being sought.

- There has been no vote by either Athens or Grafton to consider dissolution or withdrawal, and none is contemplated.

In the informational meetings leading up to the confirmation votes the discussion emphasized that the vote was not to dissolve the district but simply to let a member pursue their right to withdraw if permitted by the other towns. By comparison, there has been an active campaign by Westminster residents to consider withdrawal for some time, and supportive votes by that community's select board, and a successful vote to support withdrawal. It is for that reason that the parties have come to the SBE. There is no equivalent activity in the Athens and Grafton communities.



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After reading the note from Mr. Carroll and the SBE regarding the possibility of separating Athens and Grafton into separate districts, Athen's Don Caponcelli stated his objection to the idea in a recent note to our school board:

*"For my part I don't understand why dissolution is even a subject for discussion at this point. That aspect has not been pursued by any of the union district towns. [That, following Westminster's withdrawal] the WNUESD would default into the 2-town union school district ... had been a path that Athens and Grafton had anticipated from the beginning."*

- A combined Athens and Grafton district operates well.

Even prior to the SBE's consolidation order, Athens and Grafton were operating under a joint contract arrangement that effectively operated as a single district. Meetings were held in common and were led by a joint contract chair. The facilities operated by Athens and Grafton taught Athens and Grafton students together. With the exception of the two towns being separate tax entities, and their need to support certain accounting and other legal requirements because of their separate legal status, Athens and Grafton have effectively operated as a single entity for many years. At the time that the communities of Athens Grafton and Westminster met before the state Board of education, the members from Athens and Grafton who presented before the SBE were at pains to emphasize that the two communities were in talks to formally merge voluntarily and simply wished to pursue the matter at their own pace. It had been our position at the time that adding Westminster, a town with no common roads connecting it to "Ath/Graf" and a town whose population center was 40 minutes away from Ath/Graf would simply complicate a voluntary consolidation process that was already under way. And so it did.

- Separating Athens and Grafton would introduce unwanted uncertainty to our institutions and destabilize local tax rates.

As part of the study leading up to the decision by voters to approve the withdrawal by Westminster, the towns of Grafton and Athens appointed advisory commissions to examine the educational and fiscal consequences of such a withdrawal. This effort, led in large part by Hardy Merrill, engaged in an in-depth examination of the impact of Westminster's withdrawal on the remaining district. Their conclusions were as follows.

- The Westminster and Ath/Graf schools are nearly 40 minutes apart which makes it nearly impossible for them to share [teaching or administrative] staff or move students from one location to another.
- No Savings have been identified since the merger except the elimination of the need to have a separate audit for the Grafton and Athens School budgets.
- Consolidation at the Supervisory Union had already taken over, prior to the merger, the following functions: Bus Services, Special Education, Food Service, Payroll & Accounting; and negotiated savings related to ordering Bulk Supplies. This alternative approach was already generating the bulk of the savings anticipated by any merger at the district level.
- If Westminster were not included in the WNUESD the separation would have an INSIGNIFICANT impact on Grafton's or Athens's Homestead Education tax rate before adjustment for the town's CLA. The



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Athens/Grafton equalized pupil count accounted for 25.3% of the equalized pupil count and 35.45% of the budget, and so a Westminster withdrawal would not destabilize tax rates for the remaining district.

- The only negative fiscal consequence would be that a larger district might provide more tax stability and that should be compared to the benefits of more localized control in a district that would be more logically constructed.

By comparison NO such study has been done to determine the economic impact of fragmenting an Athens Grafton district into even smaller town districts. Absent such an analysis the consequences of such fragmentation cannot be forecast with any certainty, and we hold that it would be irresponsible to dissolve the remaining district without further study.

Again quoting Mr. Capponcelli,

*"We simply don't know the consequences of such an action and during any public discussion of the matter I would vigorously argue in opposition to returning to separate districts under a joint school contract [without knowing]."*

Our recommendation to the SBE regarding dissolution is that since no such remedy is being sought, that the idea of dissolution be put aside until such time as a petition comes before a member town in the WNUESD, with research being provided to voters, and that voters be given a chance to provide us guidance on such a proposal.

For the foregoing reasons, we respectfully request that the State Board of Education find that it is in the best interests of the State, the students, and the Towns of Athens and Grafton, for the WNUESD to continue to exist after Westminster's withdrawal

Sincerely,

Jack Bryar - Grafton

Jessa Westclark - Grafton

Lynn Morgan - Athens

Hardy Merrill - Grafton

Donald Capponcelli - Athens

Virginia Maciejowski - Athens