

Mr. Oliver Olsen - Chair

Vermont State Board of Education

1 National Life Drive, Davis 5

Montpelier, Vermont 05602-2501

RE: School Withdrawals and Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union

August 11, 2022

Dear Chair Olsen and Members of the Board:

As Chair of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Board, I write to you today to provide Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union's ('RNESU') and its member districts' views regarding the potential for Lincoln, Ripton, and/or Starksboro to be placed, involuntarily, within the RNESU. The Boards of the RNESU believe strongly that there are too many hurdles, whether structurally or financially, which would arise from the addition of any of these schools as a district of the RNESU. As such, we cannot support any decision which would place Lincoln, Ripton, or Starksboro, whether individually or in some combination, within our districts or Supervisory Union.

As you are aware, RNESU and its member towns, unlike many towns and school districts in Vermont, earnestly undertook discussions in 2015 upon the passage of Act 46 to determine if consolidation/merger of its districts: 1) was feasible, 2) would permit the districts to meet or exceed the Education Quality Standards, and 3) would maximize operational efficiencies.

On January 19, 2016, the communities of RNESU overwhelmingly voted to establish "preferred districts" in two side-by-side unified districts. The first district, Barstow Unified Union School District (BUUSD), operates a PreK- eighth grade school for the students of Chittenden and Mendon. Those students then have tuition "choice" for ninth through twelfth grade. The second district, Otter Valley Unified Union School District (OVUUSD), encompasses Brandon, Goshen, Leicester, Pittsford, Sudbury and Whiting. In this district, the elementary schools provide education for PreK- sixth grade, with the students attending Otter Valley for seventh through twelfth grade. At the time of the decision to merge, the districts of the RNESU had enjoyed and benefited from a long history of collaboration and utilization of resources such as a unified teachers' contract for over 30 years; centralized special education services for over 30 years; consolidated transportation services for over 14 years; consolidated food services for over 6 years; and a lengthy history of successful consolidation of superintendent services/oversight, centralized curriculum, and centralized financial services.

RNESU's concerns about the possibility of the addition of Lincoln, Ripton, or Starksboro are focused on financial and organizational/structural matters. If these schools are placed within the RNESU, it would negatively affect our Title 1 Comparable Test, which requires RNESU to

demonstrate that it provides “at least” the same staff/teacher ratios to the most economically disadvantaged schools as the wealthiest schools in the district. It is our understanding that Lincoln, Ripton, and Starksboro operate very small PreK-6 schools with approximately 100 students. While we do not have the full count of their staffing levels, it is reasonable to assume that these schools have a lower staff/teacher ratio than the Neshobe School with its K-6 enrollment of 450+ students. Neshobe and Otter Creek Academy are our most economically disadvantaged schools with poverty rates at 45% and 68% respectively. Under Title 1’s Comparable Test, RNESU would therefore have to “match” Lincoln, Ripton, and Starksboro staffing ratios at Neshobe, Lothrop, and Otter Creek Academy. This would require RNESU to **increase** staffing at other schools within the OVUUSD, resulting in a negative impact on the efficiencies RNESU taxpayers realized through the Act 46 merger activities. In other words, taxes may have to go up in all the towns of the OVUUSD and Barstow UUSD to accommodate the inclusion of Lincoln, Ripton, or Starksboro, a consequence antithetical to one of the major underpinnings of Act 46 and consolidation.

The current Articles of Agreement which RNESU and its member districts operate under provide for school closure by a two-thirds (2/3) majority of the board. The Lincoln, Ripton, and Starksboro communities should be aware that such a provision exists, and school closure would be decided upon by the Boards.

The proposal of including Lincoln, Ripton, and perhaps Starksboro if there is a revote which changes the recent withdrawal vote held on Starksboro, would establish a Supervisory Union with two Unified Union School Districts and one to three town school districts. RNESU and its member district boards currently use a Policy Governance model for the administration of its schools. This appears to be somewhat antithetical to the concerns that Lincoln, Ripton and Starksboro citizens have put forth as concerns with their current relationships with their underlying School District Boards.

Additionally, the addition of any of the proposed school districts would require the RNESU to analyze, and more than likely, modify the representation of each district on the RNESU Board.

As I noted in our previous correspondence to the State Board in response to the potential for Ripton to solely be added to our Supervisory Union, it cannot be stressed enough that the substantial and long term collaboration of the member districts of the RNESU has permitted us to move forward with the important work of focusing on student outcomes and providing a high quality instructional program for our students.

The addition of any of the proposed school districts brings with it issues of labor and employment issues as well. RNESU has, and has had, a unified contract for all of its schools for approximately 30 years. The addition of a new contract and employees on varying salary schedules has the potential for increasing costs for the taxpayers of RNESU as negotiations typically center on moving all employees to the higher salary rate after a merger. While we have not had the opportunity to research the comparability of the salaries for Ripton, we are aware that the MAUSD schools utilize a higher salary scale than RNESU currently provides.

On a related note, as we indicated previously, transportation within RNESU is done by the SU. This includes investments in our bus fleet and a single master collective bargaining agreement. This would require any incoming school district to consider the financial implications of both expanding employee rolls and investment in the fleet. Our current pay scale is higher than bus contractor pay scales.

Finally, while current allowable costs by school are no longer available and/or calculated by the Agency, the grade configuration and enrollment of Neshobe and presumably Lincoln, Ripton, and Starksboro has been fairly constant; however our smallest schools, under Act 46 were merged into one school resulting in one school closing, and one school becoming providing PreK Services and Child care. A review of AOE's data from 2015-2016 shows the disparity in spending differences between the schools of RNESU and the schools of Lincoln, Ripton and Starksboro:

- Data from AOE's [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-data-allowable-tuition-report-2015-2016.pdf](https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-data-allowable-tuition-report-2015-2016.pdf) illustrates vast spending differences - Allowable tuition with debt by school:
  - Lincoln elementary school Costs \$13,652/student, 113 students
  - Ripton elementary school Costs \$16,723/student, 44 students
  - Starksboro elementary school Costs \$13,152/student, 153 students
  - RNE - Neshobe elementary school Costs \$11,386/student, 332 students
    - Schools combined to create Otter Creek Academy
      - Leicester \$18,864/student, 45 students
      - Sudbury \$10297/student, 37 students
      - Whiting \$14,490/student, 30 students
      - Average \$14,862 for 112 students

RNESU respects that the voters of Lincoln, Ripton, and Starksboro exercised their rights to address their concerns with their current partnerships. It is our view that they should seek a new partnership with a district more closely aligned with their needs, size, goals, philosophy, and representation model. On behalf of the RNESU and member districts, we appreciate the Board's consideration of our position. If the SBE Board has additional questions, please feel free to contact either Superintendent Hubert or me.

Laurie Bertrand, Chair of the RNESU Board