

State Board of Education Ripton Status Report Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Meeting Place: Virtual Teams Meeting/Video/Teleconference

Date: July 29, 2022

Present:

State Board of Education (SBE) Subcommittee Members: Oliver Olsen - chair, Kim Gleason, Tammy Kolbe, Lyle Jepson, Jenna O'Farrell (8:15 a.m.)

Agency of Education (AOE): Maureen Gaidys, Suzanne Sprague, Donna Russo-Savage, Ron Ryan, Betty Roy

Others: Bill Anton - Superintendent of Windham Central Supervisory Union, Brittany Gilman – Ripton Financial Consultant, Steve Cash, Molly Witters, Dylan Patrick, Jane Phinney

Call to Order, Roll Call, Amendments to the Agenda

Oliver Olsen called the meeting to order at 8:05 a.m. Roll call was taken. There were no amendments to the agenda.

Approval of Meeting Minutes from July 27, 2022

Kim Gleason made a motion to approve the minutes from July 27, 2022. A friendly amendment was added to include the notes from Ms. Maguire's July 27th presentation, pending her approval. The motion was seconded by Tammy Kolbe. The motion passed unanimously.

Public to be Heard

Molly Witters pointed out that the nature of the last meeting was very productive, and she was impressed with Ms. Maguire's knowledge and information. Ms. Witters recognized that Ms. Maguire did not have sufficient information to provide an opinion on Ripton's future success, specifically regarding delivering special education services. Ms. Witters pointed out that when the committee provided the Ripton School Board with an outline of the specific information that was expected that special education was not an independent item, yet they did provide a response within other specified areas that outlined their plans for special education services.

Ms. Witters indicated that the Ripton School Board is aware of the error in their request to level a tax for support of school district related planning through the Town of Ripton instead of a request through the school district. Yet, it was approved at a publicly warned meeting and if the Town and school district functioned as a "business", instead of as municipalities, they would be able to resolve the issue with a phone call to someone in accounting. Correcting it is a priority for them.

Ms. Witters appreciated that committee members had verbally offered support for small schools, and she hopes that the committee will act on that support. Ripton School Board is looking for a path forward that will support small schools and allow them to maintain their autonomy. She questioned Chair Olsen's current and past statements on small school viability.

Oliver Olsen responded that his past comments had focused on sustainable governance systems. His comments were not intended to reflect a negative opinion of small schools, as small schools can and do thrive within sustainable governance systems.

Jane Phinney spoke concerning her experience in working in and managing small schools. She has input that she wishes to provide in response to Ms. Maguire's comments. Ms. Phinney is a consultant to the Ripton Board and would like an opportunity to speak. Mr. Olsen assured her that she will have an opportunity to present to the committee.

Testimony

Jay Nichols, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association has submitted written comment but is unavailable to join the Teams meeting.

Bill Anton, Superintendent of Windham Central Supervisory Union, joined the discussion. He oversees eight schools within five districts totaling approximately 1,000 students. He has been an educational leader in Vermont for 16 years, working closely with small schools. He agrees with Ripton's own acknowledgment that they are not viable as a stand-alone district. Mr. Anton focused his comments on the need to create a supervisory union with partners. He believes it would be difficult to complete the process by July 1, 2023, given all the steps that need to be taken. He pointed out that the bar for the creation of a supervisory union is very high, given the fact that an argument for doing so needs to prove evidence of enhanced efficiencies in delivery and quality. Mr. Anton believes that, at a minimum, it would take one year of planning and one year of preparation to create a new supervisory union. He bases this on the work he and his colleagues did in his region to create a collaborative. There was six months discussion, six months to undertake a feasibility study and an additional 18 months of implementing the plan. He believes it would be very challenging to stand up a new supervisory union in 11 months. Mr. Anton pointed to examples of the tasks that would need to be accomplished (noted below) and that doing so with limited full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff and/or individual staff members that are being asked to perform the tasks of several licensed positions would be extremely difficult.

- develop policies and procedures
- replicate a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) system
- create a budget that offers tax stabilization over time
- determine the longevity of the Small Schools Grant – not relying on it to continue when budgeting
- create a sinking fund for facilities
- build in significant upfront costs for standing up the supervisory union
- offer a comparison of Addison Central School District (ACSD) supports and costs with the plans for the new supervisory union
- insure a plan for Early Childhood Education delivery

- create an organizational flow chart that highlights responsibilities, including how core business functions may be outsourced such as payroll, human resource, financial management, and facilities oversight
- develop a plan for curriculum and professional development
- outline how staff will be evaluated and by whom
- create a list of vendors
- outline how Lincoln will be involved and included

Mr. Anton suggested that, if he was tasked with creating a new supervisory union, he would sit with the directors of all his departments to determine the categories of work that would need to be focused upon. He would want a minimum of two years of planning time. The first year would involve creating the plan and the following year would be spent filling positions, laying out the timeline for budget development and Town approvals (votes) necessary. To meet Ripton’s proposed July 1, 2023 start date, Mr. Anton believes the Ripton School Board will need to have all planning accomplished by a January 15th deadline so that they can warn a Town Meeting Day budget approval vote in March.

Kim Gleason asked about the feasibility of attracting fractional high-quality employees. Mr. Anton pointed out that they have difficulty in finding qualified candidates licensed in ELL (English Language Learners). Fractional OT/PT and school psychologists would be difficult, given the fact that most want full-time employment. He added that retaining fractional employees is also a difficult task. Given the nature of the small schools in his supervisory union, Mr. Anton hires specialty positions (health, PE, nurses, etc.) at the supervisory union level and then distributes their time as needed to the schools, billing each for time used.

Oliver Olsen pointed out that Ripton feels that they would be attractive to staff. Mr. Anton pointed out that people are attracted to high functioning positions. A well-resourced position would be attractive. However, he feels it would be more attractive to be in a partnership within a supervisory union where specific tasks are handled with wrap-around services and the staff are a member of a team.

Tammy Kolbe suggested that it is now assumed that the committee needs to understand how Ripton will stand up a school district as well as a new supervisory union. When asked, Mr. Anton indicated that to just create a supervisory district the timeline would still need to be two years. All services still need to be planned for and delivered. Mr. Anton was asked if he believes the report provides evidence of a process that will get Ripton to the point of “going live” on July 1, 2023. He responded that the report is lacking in Vermont specific expertise in design and delivery, which is necessary to provide all the professional responsibilities required to offer quality educational services.

Jenna O’Farrell asked for a model that might be available for Ripton to replicate. Mr. Anton suggested again that, if it was his responsibility to take on the task, he would engage with his colleagues to determine a process to create the model. He would want to think through all the issues that might arise before moving forward, including how career and technical education services for high school students would be provided.

Lyle Jepson asked about specific timelines that will need to be met. In response, Mr. Anton suggested the following timeline that districts follow in programmatic planning and budget development/approval.

- summer - review of programmatic offerings and service plans, making necessary adjustments
- end of summer – begin to craft the following year’s budget
- draft budget for individual school districts completed by October 1
- supervisory union budget complete by November 1st
- January 15 budget goes to press and warnings for voting purposes created
- informational meeting(s) prior to a March vote
- March Town Meeting vote on the school budget

Oliver Olsen asked Mr. Anton if he felt that Ripton, given the information that he has reviewed so far, could provide the State Board of Education with sufficient information within the next 30 days that would provide assurance that Ripton could “go live” on July 1, 2023. Mr. Anton believes that developing an operational plan within the next 30 days, with sufficient evidence to assure success, would be very difficult. He believes that Ripton’s document is aspirational and is the beginning of the process. The Ripton School Board needs to operationalize the aspirations, from which a budget can be created. It would be necessary to clearly outline how special education would be delivered as part of that plan. The school funding formula will need to be carefully considered.

Oliver Olsen suggested that if Mr. Anton had something he would like to submit in writing and approve for distribution with the minutes, he is welcome to do so.

Ron Ryan, AOE Program Manager for the Department of Educator Licensing spoke next. Mr. Ryan pointed out that he has been in education for 37 years, serving in most educational roles from teacher to Superintendent (20 years). He has worked for the AOE since 2017. He indicated that he has reviewed the Ripton report.

Hiring and filling educational vacancies has become more challenging over time. Wages, competing incentives, proximity to bordering states, geography, and lack of interest in teaching have all created a shortage. In years past, 50-100 applications would be received by a school district for posted elementary teaching positions. In today’s climate, 5-10 applications are received. Within the 5-10 applications there may be only two or three people that are appropriately licensed. In specialized areas, it is even more difficult. Districts struggle to find qualified applicants. Temporary licenses are often sought by superintendents on behalf of applicants. Categories include an Emergency 1-year license and a Provisional 2-year license. Requests for temporary licenses have doubled since 2016 to 700 last year alone. Mr. Ryan expects the request for temporary licenses will rise again.

Mr. Ryan pointed out that small schools often combine vacant part-time positions to attract a full-time applicant. This requires the educator to hold two different licenses. The second often is a provisional license, which carries with it a financial commitment on the part of the applicant who then needs to create a plan for taking coursework to maintain the license. There is a Standards Board for Professional Educators that reviews licensing procedures. Most recently, H.572 allows retired educators to return to their former role for one year without affecting retirement earnings.

Mr. Ryan indicated that the Licensing Department stands ready to support school districts in matching the needs of their districts by reviewing the skill sets of applicants and determining the licensing requirements of open positions.

Kim Gleason questioned the viability of overlap of some specialty positions given the expertise required, such as nursing and guidance. Mr. Ryan pointed out that all positions have specific licensing. If advertising a part-time position, a school district may not find many applicants. Combining them into a full-time position may result in more applicants. Moving from a Provisional License to a Level I endorsement can take up to three years. Often, 18-30 credits of coursework will be necessary to obtain an endorsement if the person is already licensed as a professional educator. Hiring from the supervisory union level provides for more favorable opportunities in hiring when fractional positions are involved.

Tammy Kolbe asked about the dates for standard hiring timelines. Mr. Ryan suggested that hiring generally begins on or about April 1st, due to contractual agreements that expire at that time. Ripton's staffing model would need to be finalized for recruitment purposes. Taking advantage of the candidate pool early in the hiring cycle is important.

Oliver Olsen asked Mr. Ryan if he feels the stated timing for going live for Ripton is feasible. As a former superintendent Mr. Ryan pointed out that he oversaw a process of combining nine districts into one and it took three years to get to a vote of the public. And then, multiple votes took place. It takes a great deal of time. Regarding a July 1, 2023 opening, given his former work as a superintendent, he would suggest that more time would be needed.

Jenna O'Farrell asked if educators who had been granted a Provisional License were successful in achieving endorsement. Mr. Ryan indicated that 25-30% successfully continue on to licensure using the Provisional process (i.e., 70-75% fall out).

Betty Roy, Agency of Education, reviewed the Education Quality Division's report from June 2022, which pointed out vacancies in special education. There were many open positions at that time, including five special education openings in ACSD and two at Mt. Abraham. There were also other vacancies in special needs categories. She pointed out that finding qualified staff is a concern. For tuitioning purposes, Ms. Roy explained that a school district cannot use public funds to pay for non-recognized independent school services. It is important to understand the student population and needs of that population when advertising for staff that will be able to meet those needs. Ms. Roy suggested that it is difficult to accurately understand the staffing pattern that Ripton will be following when comparing the report to the proposed budget. Risk management and contingency planning is necessary in standing up a new district and when searching for qualified staff.

Oliver Olsen invited Jane Phinney to speak at the next meeting, in addition to Brittany Gilman – Ripton Financial Consultant.

Kim Gleason suggested asking Jay Nichols to allow the committee to attach his written comments to the minutes. Kim does not believe the committee can consider the implications of a supervisory union when Lincoln is not involved in the discussion. Is there an opportunity for the committee to hear from Lincoln?

Lyle Jepson indicated that he is clearly hearing that timing is a concern. More planning time appears to be needed for the Ripton School District to meet their goal. He asked that a future conversation include providing information for an off-ramp from the current timeline with an opportunity to hear potential options that Ripton can follow.

Oliver Olsen responded that if the State Board of Education issues a negative advisory opinion that Ripton can continue forward. If the State Board issues a negative advisory opinion, the Ripton School Board or 5% of the electorate in Ripton can call for a vote in Ripton to undue the withdrawal and return to the ACSD. Act 176 offered an opportunity for the Ripton School Board to extend the transition timeline by one year (to July 1, 2024), but the Ripton School Board chose to move forward with the aggressive timeline we are now reviewing. They no longer have the option to extend the date beyond July 1, 2023 for planning and implementation purposes. The tools that are available are limited.

Oliver Olsen suggested that the narrative that ACSD voters are not sympathetic to keeping Ripton open may not be as real as some perceive it to be. He believes that if the most recent ACSD election results are an indication, the democratic process is alive and well, demonstrating that ACSD voters have heard Ripton and have a shared concern about maintaining small schools. Perhaps a time of reflection will be helpful.

Tammy Kolbe believes that clarity should be provided to the committee and Ripton School Board regarding the school closer moratorium as outlined in statute and how it might apply and support Ripton School Board upon a return to ACSD. Continued planning might then take place with the support provided by the moratorium.

Kim Gleason pointed out that she too was interested in how the moratorium might affect the process. She feels that legislators have heard the concern of small schools. She is concerned with the planning time available to Ripton School Board given the high bar expected of school districts in delivering services to students.

Mr. Cash pointed out that he would like to hear from Jane Phinney and Brittany Gilman at the next meeting and that he would be happy to have Lincoln representatives attend, including a discussion of the larger supervisory union budget as a necessary piece.

Mr. Cash addressed Mr. Anton's comment where he cited the need for evidence of increased efficiencies in the Ripton School District report as a gate required of creating a new supervisory union. Mr. Cash pointed out that Ripton was tasked to stand up a new district. It is not viable concerning efficiencies. Given that, it now appears that the task assigned to them is to prove efficiencies if combined with Lincoln. He feels that there would be efficiencies. He reflected that the Ripton School District had, by statute, only been asked to provide a status report and not a final plan. They have responded as they felt they were requested to respond. Mr. Cash asked if the process now makes their attempt impossible by default.

Adjournment

A motion was made by Kim Gleason to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Lyle Jepson. The meeting was adjourned at 10:01 a.m.

Minutes prepared by Lyle Jepson.

