

**Testimony to Joint Hearing of House Education and House Ways & Means
Thursday, March 14, 2024**

Background

For the record, my name is Debbie Singiser. I am here today in my capacity as the Chair of the Barstow Unified Union School District, which is part of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in a side-by-side with Otter Valley Unified Union School District. I also work at the Vermont School Boards Association as the Director of Board Services

Barstow Memorial School, located in Chittenden VT, was built as a memorial to a young man by the name of Frederic Duclos Barstow by his parents, William and Francoise. Frederic served in WWI and was badly injured. He succumbed to his injuries and died in his mid-30s. His grieving parents funded the construction of the school that bears his name, and it opened its doors to students in the late 1930s.

Today, Barstow Memorial School is a PK-8 school serving the students of Mendon and Chittenden. Its student enrollment is less than half of what it was in its heyday in the 1980s. Today our district has approximately 150 students in PK-8 and we tuition between 80 and 90 students to high school.

I grew up in Mendon and graduated from Barstow. My career took me out of the U.S. for 25 years. In 2011, when my own two children were entering their elementary school years, my husband and I decided to move back to the U.S. We considered a number of options of where to live and Vermont became an obvious choice with Barstow being one of the primary pull factors. As a result, our two children attended and graduated from Barstow

I was elected to the Barstow School board last Tuesday on Town Meeting Day and was elected as the new board chair earlier this week. While my election is relatively recent, my school board service is not.

During my earlier tenure as school director, from 2015-2021, Barstow's two town districts consolidated into one. We were fortunate. Our towns were already acting as a quasi-unified union school district. Act 46 was simply a formality. It legalized the union that already was there.

This seamless transition reflects the strength of support for the school by the residents of our two towns, the Barstow community. .

This support has been constant since unification in 2015 as reflected by the 100% passing rate of our school budgets with generally healthy margins ranging between 58% and 79% “yes” votes.

Unfortunately, everything changed last Tuesday. Something that I never in my wildest dreams imagined would happen. Our \$6.3 million budget was defeated. It was defeated by four votes.

“Only four votes?” you might ask. Well, considering we had never come close to a failed budget in at least 10 years, a defeat by four votes **was significant** for our district. And there’s more to the story. In speaking with our Municipal Clerks, they both said there was “ a significantly higher than usual voter turnout this year than any Town Meeting Day in the past eight years.” The numbers they shared with me support this statement.

Was the school budget a factor in this higher voter turnout? One can’t know for sure. However, considering the outcome of this year’s budget vote after 10+ years of unwavering support by voters, it is hard not to draw that conclusion.

Moreover, leading up to Town Meeting Day, the extensive media coverage about the fault lines and “expired shelf-life” of VT’s education funding system, as well as the widely cited 20% forecasted tax rate increase, worked against us. These grossly oversimplified and generalized messages frightened many of our voters, those who had historically been staunch supporters of our school district. They felt forced to decide between the needs of the district and their own personal financial situation. And in the end, the proposed spending increase and tax rate projections were simply too steep for them to support.

Other contributing factors to our defeated budget were likely to have been the complexity of the education funding formula and all those complicated terms and concepts such as: long-term weighted average daily membership, the common level of appraisal, and income sensitivity. It is so hard to find someone who understands, let alone can explain how education funding works in VT. And it requires far more than a budget flier or an annual district meeting to help voters understand how their district budget will impact their property tax.

So, where do we go from here?

Given the four vote margin, you won't be surprised to hear that a recount of the vote from TMD is happening next week.

Meanwhile, our board held a special meeting earlier this week to discuss next steps. Honestly, we are unsure what we will do. Here is the reality. Our \$6.3 million budget was a level service budget with no proposed program changes. Despite this, our budget increased by 12%, due to cost of living increases for salaries, rising health care costs, increased high school tuition costs, and inflationary pressures.

Of course, I would love to say to you today that we will find some cost savings and decrease our budget accordingly. However, I can't promise you that. The feeling among my board colleagues, who adopted the budget in January, is that the proposed budget was and still is the right one for our district. There was no fat, there was no padding, there was no taking advantage of the tax cap. The proposed budget both supports the vision of the school district and enables staff to do what is needed to support our students. Anything more than a symbolic cut in the school budget will require a reduction of staff and direct support to students, which we worry will cause irreparable harm to them.

Our goal is to re-warn the same or a revised budget next week, so will be able to hold a budget revote just before April break. The costs of the revote will be borne by the school district, which we estimate to be around \$5,000, which may seem like small potatoes to many but to our district, it is not.

Overarching all of this thinking is a pervasive concern that exists in the back of our board members' minds but is almost too frightening to say out loud. It goes like this: That, despite our genuine efforts to do what's best for our students at a cost that we believe will be acceptable to our electorate, that it won't be enough. In other words, it is too late. Our hands have been tied to the point that no matter what path we decide to take—revise the budget or re-warn the same one—we won't be able to assure approval by our electorate.

And if we do get it eventually approved, that it will be by a small margin—a handful of votes. And, that is not ideal either. Because we know that schools do better when they have support from their community, overwhelming support. Something we had until this year.

And, that, that is what has kept me awake almost every night since March 5th.

Thank you.