

3-18-14 notes re House Education Committee, Resolution 14-742 draft 5.1

Comments and Questions regarding the proposed legislation whereby SU's will cease to exist, school districts will be realigned into Expanded districts, to be governed by a single board, and have one budget.

1. Setting Goals: The Ed Committee needs to be clear as to what problem(s) it is attempting to fix, and focus its analysis on that (those) problem(s). If the goal of the Ed Committee is to address the **rising cost** of education, then the focus must be on the real drivers of educational costs. If the committee is looking to **improve outcomes** for lower-achieving students, then focus this analysis on how to improve educational opportunities where the system is not working. Be clear what problem is being addressed, and recognize that these 2 issues often require solutions that counteract each other.

2. Cost of statewide Realignment. If mergers are undertaken statewide, this will be a costly process, including the hiring of highly paid professionals for the Design Team, as well as lawyers and accountants to assist each new district in the particulars of dismantling districts and supervisory unions, and setting up new legal and financial systems. The legislature must be very sure this is not just a solution looking for a problem, as this will be a huge investment. Education dollars are too scarce already to waste on a costly experiment without guaranteed savings and/or clear improvement of educational outcomes.

Don't assume mergers will provide relief for both educational *and* financial problems, and be clear which is your primary focus since these two goals will often compete. If the impetus for merger is to save costs, then consolidation of districts may be missing the mark.

3. Small schools and cost per pupil.

Vermont is a rural state: We need to look at student population per square mile, not just costs per pupil, as we study how to balance costs and educational needs across our state. We need to consider how many miles and hours young children should spend in a school bus, in the interest of achieving economies of scale. Small schools, at least for elementary-age children, will still be necessary in Vermont when all things are considered.

4. SCHOOL CHOICE has been suggested as a possible educational benefit of this realignment, but except in the case where there is dense population, such as the Burlington area, the feasibility of school choice is limited by geography throughout most of Vermont, especially for young children for whom long daily commutes would be inappropriate and cost-prohibitive.

The benefits of "school choice" must be carefully balanced with the state's responsibility to provide "equal opportunity" to all our children.

Caution must be undertaken in the writing of this law, such that private magnet schools do not draw education funds by means of *vouchers* for students who wish to opt out of the public school system. Funding our public schools equitably would be endangered if school vouchers were given for non-public schools.

5. A merger exploration is currently underway for a MUUSD in our Supervisory Union, and it is very likely that one or more districts will opt out (chose to remain independent), as is now allowable in the law. If a merger vote is accepted by a majority, but not all districts, how will that be dealt with in a revised merger law? If the goal of the proposed legislation is to leave no district un-aligned, does it make sense to continue planning for a MUUSD at this time? (See reference to "*preliminary approval for application for a plan if it does not exclude an existing district that would be an appropriate member...*") also see Section 8... REDs

The 9 schools in our Supervisory Union currently share services and resources, and the SU is able to achieve cost efficiencies by doing so. The biggest inefficiency in the current system is the redundancy of budgetary work that is done in the central office; merging the SU into one entity with one single budget should save much work in central office. Here is my concern: While this efficiency would be accompanied by a savings in administrative *work*, the merger planning committee in our case has indicated we should expect **no financial savings despite the work reduction**, that current administrative *staff* will remain in place. In fact, with the elimination of dozens of multi-talented citizen board members, paid staff will be needed to replace the time and talents of board members, who generously serve now without compensation. Under current law, the Education Fund will be used to provide tax reduction incentives in districts that voluntarily merge, regardless of any cost benefits. The Education Fund will also be tapped into to pay for the costs of transitioning to a new governance structure.

6. Question: How can we rationalize using precious education dollars to give tax breaks to communities whose mergers do not reduce costs? If hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent to pay lawyers and accountants to re-align districts, this cost must be weighed against the real benefits.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of all our children.

Megs Keir

mkeir@accessvt.com

Huntington School board member, and Voluntary Merger Planning member in CESU