

**House Education Committee Testimony
Daniel M. French, Superintendent
Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union
February 27, 2014**

February 27, 2014
Governance Structure for
Education
Daniel French
House Education

Background

- Superintendent for the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union since 2007
- Superintendent for the Essex North Supervisory Union from 2004-2007, and Principal of the Canaan Schools from 1997-2004.
- Past President of the Vermont Superintendents Association, and Vermont Superintendent of the Year 2009
- Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union:
 - Comprised of the towns of Sunderland, Manchester, Dorset, Pawlet, Rupert, Danby, Mt. Tabor, Londonderry, Landgrove, Peru, Weston, and Winhall
 - 11 school districts, 2,200 students, 54 school board members
 - 6 schools (3 K-8s and 3 K-6s) and no high school. Parents have high school choice with a significant number choosing to attend Burr and Burton Academy. Our districts pay tuition to 35 different high schools in Vermont around the world.
 - Districts in four Vermont counties, three Vermont technical center regions, and two districts designate New York High schools with those students largely attending a New York BOCES for technical education
 - Mountain Towns RED and the Winhall Town School District joined the BRSU on July 1, 2013.

Comments

1. I commend the Committee for taking on the issue of school district reorganization. I believe the current structure is highly inefficient and has created significant variances in educational opportunities for students across the state.
2. I think the Committee's governance bill outline is a good approach: 1) it articulates a desired end state, 2) it allows for local solutions within a finite time frame, and 3) and it creates a larger plan based on a close examination of each regional education ecosystem.
3. I believe the process for governance change as outlined in the law should be as simple as possible - implementation will be complex enough without having to deal with a burdensome process from the law.
4. There will be a need for technical assistance resources for the AOE and local districts. Areas of technical assistance will need to include: legal, financial, leadership, and information systems. Our experience forming the RED and integrating two new districts into our supervisory union indicates this will be a very complex process. There will be a need for "just-in-time" support as issues emerge. The Committee should consider securing funding to create an ad hoc entity outside of the AOE structure to provide such support.

5. Single K-12 systems will not be a panacea, but I believe they greatly increase the odds of our success in creating more effective education systems
 - a. Education system efficiency is expressed as a simple ratio, Education Spending per Equalized Pupil. Greater efficiency is represented by a smaller ratio among these two variables. Absent governance reform, our only approach to reducing this ratio is to address the numerator, Education Spending. This means districts will be forced to chip away at essential education programs as the number of students decreases. The creation of larger K-12 systems allows us to leverage the denominator of this ratio to increase efficiency by aggregating larger numbers of students into a single district.
 - b. In an era of declining numbers of students, sharing resources among districts becomes a major strategy to reduce cost. Larger K-12 systems better enable the sharing of resources.
 - c. Addressing equity of opportunity will require a more dynamic approach to school improvement based on the ability to connect educators in a common curriculum and professional development system. Larger K-12 systems better enable the development of such a system.
6. As described under 5c above, I think the Committee should contemplate how these new K-12 systems should be organized to maximize education quality. Technology is providing us with new tools to offer and develop learning opportunities for students. I am concerned that larger K-12 systems could be used as a more efficient means to implement misguided federal education policies by the AOE, policies which have been ineffective and extremely expensive, and, in my view, were not subjected to sufficient public input before adoption. The new K-12 system should be based on the assumption that best practices will emerge locally, and that the major function of the AOE is to then act as a curator of these practices so as to ensure their broad dissemination.