

April 10, 2014

To : Members of House Committee on Ways and Means

From: Francis Russell, Rochester School Board

Re: Reaction to Education Governance Legislation, House Bill H. 883

Dear Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

I am a School Board Member in Rochester, but I was unable to appear before the Committee for its hearing on H883 on Wednesday late afternoon.

I appreciate the Committee's interest in hearing from groups and individuals who will be most directly affected by implementation of H. 883 and wanted through this email to offer a School Board member's reaction to items of this important legislation in its current form.

Item #1 Clearly, H. 883 would diminish local control of our Rochester School and of our budget in Rochester. In place of a five member board, Rochester would be represented by a lesser number among a much larger number of members on the board of an "expanded district"—in Rochester's case, a district that might encompass Hancock, Rochester, Bethel, Stockbridge, Chelsea, Royalton, Sharon, Stafford, and Tunbridge.

Item #2 As a locally representative body, H. 883 offers only that "Each school would have a council designed to build partnerships among families, staff, and the community." Beyond the fewer board members on the expanded board, what one consultative body, responsive and fully accountable to its public, would voters in the town of Rochester then have?

Additionally, do the members of the committee consider that the above items (and items #8, #9, #10 considered below) will result in fewer or, as I would judge, even more school budgets being "voted down"?

Item #8 H. 883 creates a legal/fiscal research group (a) which would examine implications/issues with regard to equity, school choice, tax rate, municipal ownership, incorporated districts, employment contracts, and voting/representation for expanded districts, (b) make recommendations for action to the General Assembly, (c) guide district as they address these issues in their articles of agreement, and (d) complete this work by January 2015. The unreality of the timeline only underlines the too ambitious scope of this proposed group's charges.

Item #9 H. 883 offers that "Communities that voluntarily merge will have the ability to draft their own merger plans and articles of agreement. . . specify[ing] how the new district will treat a range of issues, including town representation on the new board, closure of schools, and school choice." This item is silent (a) on the vehicle through which a community would decide to voluntarily merge and (b) also on the vexing question of the (probably small) town which, being willing to merge, was unhappy with the merger plans and/or articles of agreement strongly favored by the other (as in my item #1 example, eight) towns.

Item #10 The design team's charges—monitoring progress of voluntary mergers, conducting community engagement activities in communities where newly expanded districts were not taking, and (post 2017) developing criteria, process, and overall plan to assign or create new expanded districts—are also very ambitious. Even in as small a state as Vermont, its charges are not accomplishable, without adequate staffing and funding.

Item #12 I would hope you have heard from many as to the inadequacy of the funding proposed in this item—in particular, the \$20K for fees incurred by districts in process of voluntary alignment and the \$50K for expanded districts to cover transition costs.

Thank you for taking time to consider my reactions to H. 883 in its current form.