

The Honorable Johannah Donovan, Chair  
Vermont House Committee on Education  
[jdonovan@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:jdonovan@leg.state.vt.us)  
[jdonovan@burlingtontelecom.net](mailto:jdonovan@burlingtontelecom.net)

March 18, 2014

Dear Ms. Donovan

I had hoped to testify in person regarding the merits of the proposed "Expanded PreK-12 School District" bill as drafted and sponsored by you and Representative Peltz. Unfortunately I cannot appear as I must attend a contract negotiations session in WCSU this evening. There are two big ideas that I'd like to convey in support of your work and this bill. First, I see evidence within my own supervisory union that if our communities and leadership were creative and collaborative, the bill provides opportunity to support and sustain many small schools rather than close and destroy them. Secondly, I see incredible opportunity to be resourceful and thus reduce costs throughout the system. I kindly request that you read these comments into the record as testimony in my absence.

Let me start by commending you and Mr. Peltz for finding a meaningful avenue to address the challenges that Vermont school districts are facing as enrollment declines and costs escalate. I am the Superintendent of one union 450 student 7-12 school and six elementary schools all but one of which have 50 students or less. Our communities value education and work hard to maintain good programs and high standards. However the cost to maintain our high quality schools as individual units is forcing us to cut programs and staff. I fear we are not meeting our potential to educate our students for college and career readiness and to meet their personal aspirations under the current conditions. Without open avenues to share resources and responsibility for educating our children, we will soon be facing the inevitable demise of some of our schools. Although we are working hard to support each other, we find that there are many barriers to truly sharing the work and workers in a way that could maximize our efforts. These barriers include:

- The way students are counted and accounted for, which determines how funds can be applied to support school programs and creates a barrier to opening the doors to more fluid opportunities for exchange within a supervisory union.
- Long existing disparities in contracts that are difficult to rectify through negotiations.
- Single district governance and control of real estate, buildings and educational tools.
- Situations and conditions that often put us in competition with each other for everything from tuition students to substitute teachers.
- Governance that often divides rather than unite in productive efficient and effective efforts.

The Boards of the WCSU member schools have been in conversation about the possibilities that collaboration and consolidation could provide. We see possibilities in sharing campuses, the unique characteristics of which could more broadly benefit a larger cohort of students. We talk about jointly contracting staff that could more fluently move from one school to the next depending on student need. We contemplate sharing leadership and matching skill sets to compliment rather than duplicate talents within buildings. Under the current conditions and structures, this kind of collaboration is difficult or prohibitive.

I've worked in four Vermont supervisory unions beginning in 1974 and have usually found them to be a rather polite but forced grouping that would often be more competitive than collaborative. I believe restructuring to create PreK-12 districts in the manner the bill contemplates would provide the structure and support we need to be truly collaborative and work in the best interests of the kids whom we are serving. PreK-12 districts, rather than supervisory unions, would be better poised to provide high quality and sustainable education for all Vermont kids.

I have heard quite a bit of speculation that a unified PreK-12 district would not necessarily reduce costs. I disagree with this. At this time we have incredible duplication of services and redundancy of efforts across our schools that includes expenditure of money and human resources, a costly commodity. As Superintendent I am responsible for eight (8) budgets, reporting to and advising eight (8) boards, supervising individual administrators in each of the buildings. Board members too are duplicating efforts as they make individual decisions for common problems and challenges. Redundancy exists in all too many pockets in most supervisory unions whose schools are not governed by one board.

In crafting the bill you have demonstrated leadership to address inequities and seek reasonable ways to break down political, geographic and financial barriers that stand in the way of success. The bill establishes and supports the structures that are needed for cross school district collaboration and provides flexibility to be creative so that communities which have banded together in the supervisory union model can truly reach their potential by sharing resources including campuses and students when and where advantageous. The expanded opportunity should be recognized as an opportunity for school districts, not a mechanism to take away their decision-making capabilities.

Education is a complex and expensive enterprise. In order to survive and thrive, Vermont schools need to exist in an effective, sustainable and fiscally responsible system. One that supports stable leadership, provides equal access to high quality opportunities and maintains opportunities for communities to stay connected and involved in collaborative, mutually supportive relationships that can work to provide the best educational opportunities for children. I see opportunity in the bill to cultivate the shared ownership that is critical for sustainability of our schools and look forward to its success. Please let me know if I can be helpful in any way to further advance the mission. I have examined in detail, and have discussed with my boards, ways to creatively think of our school communities in a more collaborative, productive, fiscally responsible way and would be delighted to share these with you and others who are interested.

Sincerely,

Alice Thomason Worth