

My name is Laura Soares and I have served the community of Randolph as a school board member for over twenty years. I have also had the opportunity to work with school boards, superintendents and business managers across the state. I was a member of both the Council on Educational Governance and the Opportunity to Learn Commission. I have given much attention and thought to the issue of governance and school systems over the past two decades.

I strongly support developing PK - 12 educational systems in Vermont to better provide equity and more expansive educational opportunities for our students in a more efficient manner.

Over my twenty plus years I have seen great value to our students' education as the communities of Braintree, Brookfield and Randolph have voluntarily aligned our districts to operate and govern as a K -12 system to the maximum degree our current structure will allow.

But it took too long and was as much a matter of luck- having all the right people in place at the right time- as the dedication and hard work of many people in our system over many years. And it is too fragile.

Fifteen years ago we were a loose confederate of schools who tolerated each other. It took us a crisis of leadership to see the value of collaboration. Then it took a decade with the right leadership at all levels of our system to achieve our current system. It is still cumbersome and duplicative in areas.

Despite our best efforts to build a sustainable system, I fear that to a substantial degree it is still held together by personalities and a decade from now the alignment and coordination as a k-12 system will be diminished.

Several years before Act 153, our SU Board was not interested in discussing changing our governance structure. With Act 153 and more time collaborating, we were ready to explore and established a RED committee which I facilitated. While I did not feel I had the necessary knowledge and experience to lead this effort, I saw no one else better able to do so and I had worked with Ray Proulx in the RED study of Fairfax and Fletcher. Our main goal was to determine if a RED could strengthen our small schools, ensure sustainability of our system, increase educational opportunities for our students and better leverage community resources.

In November of 2012 nearly 3000 citizens voted and 66% supported the RED. But it did not pass in Brookfield. A swing of 9 votes would have made the difference.

I support the vision you have to put Vermont on a path to PK -12 systems of sufficient size to provide equity, opportunities and efficiencies. I feel your approach is balanced in allowing a period of time for districts to voluntarily organize before a final plan is developed by the state.

I would like to offer some suggestions on areas that require careful consideration based on my experiences.

1. **Do not be absolute regarding the size requirements.** While systems need to be of sufficient size to provide broad opportunities to learn, and research can provide us a guide, large and small labels in the nation do not apply to Vermont. Geography, history, culture all need to be a considered in the formation of systems.
2. **Allow enough time for this to be done well.** It is too important to be rushed. We need capacity of the state and the AOE to support this work. When we were in our RED Study on several occasions I received conflicting answers from the then DOE, sometimes even from the same person. At times what I heard from our legal counsel was inconsistent with the DOE. I believe it was due to lack of experience with the complex issues that arise. This has to be addressed. Each question needs to be answered once and everyone needs to understand the rules, options and implications. We also need capacity in the field to facilitate this process.
3. **Be thoughtful as to how these districts are named.** It may seem small but it is not. Our identities are tied to our schools. We had fears in our communities that individual schools would be renamed- when it was the name of the district itself that would be impacted. We still have community members today that are resentful that our union high school is named Randolph Union High School and therefore does not honor the communities of Braintree and Brookfield in the name.
4. I applaud the concept of **school based community councils**. I am pleased to see they are not elected- as that would cause role confusion and replicate our SU structure. *I suggest, however, that councils themselves remain an option and that what is required is a formal process for ensuring the opportunity for the community to engage with and have voice in their local schools.* There may be other ways to accomplish this goal and we should allow for creativity and approached that fit individuals communities.
5. The largest hurdle we faced in our RED was the **board structure**. The issue almost disbanded the committee. The US Census shows Randolph with 67% of the population, but none of our communities felt the board should be controlled by Randolph. We wanted at least two voices from the smaller communities, a reasonably sized board, proper representation for Randolph and to meet the obligations of the equal protection clause of the US Constitution. We worked with our attorney and the DOE to propose a defensible 8 member board with 4-2-2 representation. To protect Randolph all 8 seats are voted at-large. *My hope is that we can put the best minds together to provide a range of board options for our new districts to consider- ones they know have been vetted and are defensible.* That would be of great assistance to ensure we meet our democratic

obligation to all size communities.

6. Finally- in regards to **protecting our schools from closure**. It was told to us that only certain Articles of Agreement were allowed on the ballot under 706- and only those Articles would require a vote of the electorate to change. Closing of schools does not meet this definition and we feared that despite any protections we placed in our Articles, the future board could change without a vote of the electorate. This should be clarified and if necessary revised to allow this control.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I applaud your vision and your work on this bill.