

Stephen Urgenson, Ed.D., Superintendent
The Orleans Central Supervisory Union
Testimony for the House Education Committee
January 22, 2014

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I am Stephen Urgenson, Superintendent of the Orleans Central Supervisory Union. Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my views with you today.

I appreciate the difficult challenges facing the Legislature. Our schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the higher standards of the Common Core State Standards, retraining our workforce and expanding our access to information technology while costs increase in personnel salaries and benefits including health insurance, and the Affordable Care Act.

I fear that the confluence of increasing student needs and soaring costs in areas of spending that local boards cannot control will force many school boards to ask their communities to pay more for less and support school budgets that reduce services and dismantle programs and at the same time have significant tax increases. I realize the fiscal realities we face present difficult choices, many of which may have long term effects on our schools and communities.

Small Schools Aid

A prime concern of our small rural schools is the proposed elimination of small school aid. Schools in the Northeast Kingdom are among the lowest in SES in Vermont and among the most frugal. I am worried that eliminating small school aid, a major source of revenues supporting our schools, will make it impossible to prepare our students for success in the future.

Our area of the state includes some of the least wealthy schools in Vermont. We face the challenge, of providing a twenty-first century education that prepares students to be college and career ready and the struggle to keep our budgets affordable to taxpayers.

Because of poverty, a disproportionate number of our children arrive at the school door step with deficits in experiences that would prepare them for learning and we struggle to pay for the programs and experiences they need and deserve.

Currently, there are 104 Vermont districts, with fewer than 100 students or 20 students per grade, that receive small schools funding. In the Orleans Central Supervisory Union, all six of its elementary schools receive more than half a million dollars a year in small schools aid. In schools where boards struggle to keep their budgets affordable to tax payers every year, the loss of small schools aid would be devastating.

Sparseity and the Challenge of Consolidation

The idea of consolidating schools, in many different guises including but not limited to school consolidation, supervisory union consolidation, and supervisory union reorganization, has provided fodder for numerous policy wonks but no clear solution. The recent opportunity for schools to voluntarily consolidate and dearth of schools that have embraced this is a demonstration how belief in the tradition of local control, where every school has a board of directors who make decision about how much they should spend, is deeply engrained in Vermonters. This core belief is especially strong in the Orleans Central Supervisory Union.

Before the idea of consolidation is explored, the defining characteristic of rural school sparcity, needs to be discussed. Rural schools in the Northeast Kingdom are characterized by sparcity, which means there is a large area separating a small number of students. Consolidating our small schools into one location would increase the travel time for these students, many of whom ride the school bus for well over an hour and when they arrived, there would be no place to put them.

In addition to requiring more money to provide bus transportation for students to travel for a reasonable time, money would be needed for school construction, expansion and renovation. Schools in the Northeast Kingdom are old, small and far apart. Bringing students to a central location where personnel could be consolidated would require additional vehicles for transportation and money for school expansions provided on a timely basis.

Currently there is a freeze in school construction state aid with no end in sight. If we expect communities to seriously discuss the idea of consolidation, they have to be assured that money will be available to expand and renovate their schools.

In order to have a serious conversation about school consolidation, people have to be confident that when it comes time to implement changes, the money needed to make a successful transition will be there.

Finally, a serious exploration of these issues needs information, guidance and logistical support from the Agency of Education. For this to become a reality, the agency must have the requisite capacity to support the Legislature, school boards and administrators in this endeavor.

High Speed Internet, Broad Band Access and Mobile Phone Capacity

In the twenty-first century, education, work and everyday living are driven by the exponential expansion of information technology. The exponential growth of Internet activity in education, business and society in general makes it essential that schools have access to expanded broadband capacity on an affordable basis.

In the world of information, access and connectivity reign supreme. Schools in the Orleans Central Supervisory Union, as well in Vermont and across the nation, have

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embraced information technology and are making it an integral part of their education practice. In the Orleans Central Supervisory Union, the use of information technology in the classroom is growing at a geometric rate but the same can't be said about our access to broadband. Without the leadership and support of the Legislature, we will not be able to satisfy the increasing need for expanded, affordable, high speed Internet access and to provide a 21st century education to our children.

In closing, over the years, members of the Legislature have been staunch supporters of our schools and we greatly appreciate the leadership and support you have provided to meet the needs of our children.