

**House Ways and Means Committee**

**Testimony on H. 883 Expanded pk-12 Districts**

**April 8, 2014**

**Laura Soares**

**Randolph School Board Member 1993-2014**

Thank you for your work on this important bill.

I strongly support expanded prekindergarten- grade twelve school districts for four compelling reasons.

1. **PK-12 Systems will better support our local schools in providing our students with deep, rich and varied educational opportunities to prepare them for success beyond graduation.** In our SU, Orange Southwest comprising the towns of Randolph, Braintree and Brookfield, we have mirrored a k-12 district to the extent possible within the limitations of our current governance structure. As a result we have been able to dramatically expand learning opportunities over the past decade. For example we are instituting a Project-Based Learning Lab at the middle school/high school and an Interactive Foreign Language Institute at the Tech Center. We have added capstone projects at the end of elementary school and middle school in addition to our long term senior project. We have strengthened our school-community connections. These efforts are possible because our principals are educational leaders whose time is protected to allow them to focus on innovation for the future.

We have a system-wide literacy initiative associated with UVM. We have a collaborative approach to moving to the Common Core, leading us to a shared mathematics program and joint professional development. We are aligned across the system horizontally and vertically. All of these initiatives are possible because we are leveraging the entire system, both the expertise and the wisdom of the people and the financial strength we bring together.

2. **The ability to achieve efficiencies of operations through a systematic approach.** Our SU has combined all non-instructional services such as facilities, technology, food service, and purchasing to leverage our resources. All of these efforts have resulted in efficiencies of time and money for our communities. For example, we developed a unified facility management system. In the first year of implementation we saved \$62,000 while reducing the square foot cost of maintaining our buildings and increasing the cleanliness of our schools. The next year the high school media center was remodeled. We had an estimate from an outside contractor of \$500k. We used the in-house labor and expertise that we now had and completed the project for \$150k. We

consolidated technology leases which allowed us to save \$200k every year while improving our technological capacity.

3. **Strengthen the prospect of our small local schools to remain open by working within a larger network of schools.** We have two small and one larger elementary school. All three of our towns have strong connections to their school. All of our schools have seen declining enrollment. Our smaller schools historically struggled to clean and maintain buildings, get internet access to the buildings, run a food program in the black, attract and retain employees particularly specialists such as art and music teachers. By collaborating as a system, we have been able to address all of these issues within level funded budgets. Our small schools have been able to weather challenges successfully and actually expand educational programming because of our k-12 system approach.
4. **The ability to recruit and retain talented school leaders.** Leadership at all levels is critical for successful schools. Research in this area is clear. Turnover in leadership can cause disruption in advancing the educational mission of schools. We have been able to attract and retain high quality leadership and it is directly due to our collaborative structure. All of our current principals have had and continue to have other job opportunities. Many have significant commutes. They have, to date, chosen to stay and have clearly indicated the attraction is our collaborative k-12 system structure and culture that allows them to focus on educational leadership. This stability in leadership allows us to enhance our educational opportunities- which brings me back to our core mission.

To summarize, I ask you to support H.883 to

1. **Better support our local schools in providing our students with deep, rich and varied educational opportunities to prepare them for success beyond graduation.**
2. **Increase our ability to achieve efficiencies of operations through systematic approaches.**
3. **Strengthen the prospect of our small local schools to remain open by working within a larger network of schools.**
4. **Improve our ability to recruit and retain talented school leaders.**

While my supervisory union has voluntarily come together to collaborate as k-12 system to the extent possible within our current governance, legal and financial structures - it is not enough. **The process took too long and is still too fragile.** The amount of energy expended on maintaining the system cannot be overstated and threatens the long-term sustainability of our efforts. This energy is energy that would be better directed towards our core educational mission. I believe it is our moral obligation to our students and to our communities as leaders to move toward sustainable pk-12 systems that will allow us to better meet the challenge of ensuring every Vermont student reaches their potential as well-educated citizens. Our futures all depend on it.