

**MEMO TO:** David Sharpe, House Education Committee Chair, House Education Committee Members

**FROM:** Helen Keith, resident of MMU school district, Huntington School District (CESU), parent of two sons who attended Jericho Elementary schools, Camel's Hump Middle School and graduated from Mount Mansfield Union High School. Early Childhood and Family Support Services Systems Consultant/Coach, M.Ed, 2015.

**SUBJECT:** Testimony regarding the November 4, 2014 vote in the Huntington Elementary School District to remain as an independent, locally governed Pre-K through Grade 4 school district, a vote to not merge into a Pre-K through Grade 12 Modified Mount Mansfield Union School District.

**DATE:** February 4, 2015

**Brief History:** In late 2012, Chittenden East Supervisory Union formed its second Voluntary Merger Planning Committee in two years. The first committee, enabled by Act 153, brought merger or consolidation of governance structures to a vote in June of 2011 after a phase one report was presented in each school district. It was voted down by Richmond and Huntington; and, nearly, by Bolton. Jericho and Underhill voted for it in 2011. The second effort to "merge" was brought to a vote on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2014. This vote resulted in the creation of the Mount Mansfield Modified Union School District (MMMUSD). All Elementary School Districts (Bolton, Jericho, Richmond and two in Underhill) except Huntington voted in favor of the merger. Chittenden East Supervisory Union now consists of one Pre-K – 4 Elementary School District and one Pre-K – 12 School District. (Children from Huntington will continue to attend Camel's Hump Middle School and Mount Mansfield High School.)

**Some Issues to Consider:** The ability to split the vote, and move ahead without molding – seeking consensus after the last defeat, put the cart before the horse in my opinion. In retrospect, there was no effort with communities to revisit the 2011 phase one report and talk about why the merger was defeated. There was a sense of frustration on all parts, those in favor thinking the tail had "wagged the dog" and that was not fair. Those who had concerns wanted at least time to plan first, do second. There was little to no planning (working on articles that decided what to do about non joining districts isn't the kind of planning I am talking about), no additional studying (I attended quite a few meetings without seeing this, although a report was done in 2011 that is referred to as a "study"), many declarations of just "trust us" and let's get these required-by-the-state articles of agreement to the voters fast. I prefer(ed) community-building. The Committee was 14-1 on the fast track. People tried to reverse the process, to get the community-building and planning underway, similar to Addison North East Supervisory Union. "Community" meetings were held to promote the merger report (the template that was approved by AOE staff and the State Board of Education). One meeting was held for all school districts together to give input to the report/proposal.

The proposal, approved by a confused (in my opinion) State Board of Education (I was there, but check the video of the meeting on 8/19), included a legal requirement that no schools close for four years after merger. There is no question in my mind that a key issue in this uploading of power to a regional board and dropping local boards is: who makes the decision to close a school (and there may have to be school closures) and how buildings are used? The board voted that the Merger Committee had completed the appropriate template (process) and was confused if they were voting that they actually agreed (assessed the merits of the plan...) with the law stating it was in the best interest of Vermont's students. They voted to approve the AOE backed proposal.

In November 2014, CESU was the only SU that had moved forward on this issue in the whole state, with the surrounding supervisory unions deciding not to go forward to even bring it to the voters. Others nearby were/are having difficulties with boards that already have consolidated. These are not easy questions to answer: how to improve educational opportunities especially for hard to reach children, cost containment/accountability and runaway property taxes that have little to do with local school board decision making.

The system itself needs re-forming and teachers, families and community members should be front and center in offering their opinions in an organized, thoughtful, facilitated manner (perhaps some mediation skills would be helpful). Our children and their needs are the best known by teachers and families. As far as I know, no one asked them in any organized and anonymous ways for their input.

The MMMUSD Articles (the proposal, the report, the template) which were the basis for the vote provide little data other than historical enrollments and a weak attempt to identify some cost savings; and, is, in my opinion, mythical, in four big ways. In fact the idea of using enrollment projections, even knowing them, was rejected in several meetings as was the collecting of data on assets and liabilities, until the very end.

First, improved educational opportunities for anyone, let alone hard to reach children/students, were not addressed in meaningful ways. Secondly, most studies on consolidation efforts in rural states say, paraphrasing, “don’t base consolidation on cost savings.”

Another myth, assumed property taxes would decrease for those towns that voted yes. Well, temporarily. And, it is likely that the 50-100 dollar savings won’t be noticed in the property tax bill as that bill most likely will go up anyway, driven by the education funding formula embedded in state law. The funding formula is not even understood by most legislators who actually vote on the Governor’s recommendations and those of his staff. This is for the most part a statewide and somewhat a local issue and should change. There needs to be a complete shift from the residential/homestead property tax to another source that does not end up in bad social policy. I think it has outlived its original usefulness. Decreasing the General Fund portion of the Education Fund only pumps up property taxes, and very few people understand the number of ways the “state” influences tax rates paid by school district residents. The system is too complex and removed from the voters.

The last myth was that CESU needed this single, super-powered regionalized board in order to do certain things, the specifics of which remained, essentially, undisclosed. There was no action plan to consider. Smoothing out bumps in the road and saving administrative time were assumed to be more beneficial than keeping the local boards and their properties in place. The report contained a 2014 Cost Benefit Analysis, which was pretty much a 90% cut and paste of the 2011 Cost Benefit Analysis into the 2014 Agency of Education required template for mergers. This would have been better had it been a template for engaging communities, teachers and school staff and families in building an improved and cost effective educational system. Samples of a useful educational cost benefit analysis could be helpful in the future.

For me, there was not enough detail in the report that identified the problems and proposed outcomes to benefit students, especially hard to reach students/children, families, staff and communities. I do not think the merger-consolidation of governance structures driven by Act 156 is the way to solve the problems of the education system in Vermont and its financing.

VSA Title 16, Chapter 7, section 261a outlines the responsibilities of the Vermont Supervisory Unions. The responsibilities and authority already exists to address anything mentioned thus far. So let’s do it in our existing local governance structures. Why not get creative about even more collaboration, building communities, encouraging them to be involved. There should not be any fear in standing up for local governance systems for our youngest children, their families and our communities. Once they are gone it will be difficult to get them back.

In closing, the ballot was confusing – a yes vote, vote for a new board while dismissing the local ones, vote no and maybe you vote for a new board (or maybe you will get one anyway), vote no and maybe there won’t be a new board, and maybe there will be... The ballot, in my opinion, symbolizes the mess that this was and since I prefer some clarity when approving something, I voted no. Thank you for your time and best wishes in your planning.