

Testimony on Act 46:

11/18/15

Mark S. Andrews, Superintendent, Essex Town School District

The communities of Essex, Essex Junction and Westford overwhelmingly signaled that the time is right to join together and continue the journey of excellence in our school system by creating an even stronger system of education through Act 46. I'd like to thank members of this committee and other members of the legislature for creating this opportunity for Vermont students and its local communities.

Having had the privilege in participating in the Essex Town, Essex Junction and Westford Study Committee's work over the last 8 months, I can honestly say that I have never in my career observed such a high level of integrity, commitment, passion, courage and teamwork that this committee of 20 demonstrated throughout the study process. And I believe it's because of their work, that there was landslide win in Essex Town and Essex Junction and a 2:1 win in the town of Westford.

I had the opportunity to lead as a Superintendent in a multi-town supervisory union in the North East Kingdom for 6 years prior to signing on with Essex Town School District in 2010. I know firsthand the challenges in trying to serve 6 towns whose governance structure included the gamut: school choice, PK-12 single District, K-6 single districts and Union School Districts and ghost boards. Although I valued my role in serving multiple school boards, my role as an educational leader was severely diminished and compromised due to the constant requirement to focus on board management rather than student learning.

In Essex Town School District the Superintendent serves one community and one school board, who as trustees of the school district have one mission and one vision that direct the work of the Superintendent. As the Superintendent in Essex Town my primary responsibility, codified in policy, is to design and execute a multiyear strategic plan that helps kids achieve outcomes the community of Essex expects. Moreover, based on policy, I'm held accountable to demonstrating how the community's investment of 22 million dollars is benefitting students. This approach to school board governance establishes a clear and transparent link between student performance and Superintendent performance.

In a single district and soon to be unified union district, the Superintendent is not hampered by different sets of policies, individual school structures, school centric leadership, community-based cultural barriers, board turnover and dysfunction and most importantly, varying levels of investments depending on the number of kids who are enrolled in school.

There's no doubt in my mind that merging Essex Town School District and Chittenden Central Supervisory Union made a ton of sense for two reasons- one, it's better for kids. In a PK-12 model of education, the curriculum will be aligned, common assessment models will be created and used to monitor performance using one agreed upon metric and teacher and leader development will be better coordinated based on the needs of students- these changes alone will ensure educational quality and equity for all kids.

Two, by creating one school board, many of the current administrative responsibilities needed in serving 5 school boards will be eliminated. By consolidating 2 central offices based on this new board governance model- district service expenses can be reduced.

Unlike the modified merger that occurred within the Chittenden East Supervisory Union, involving a supervisory union that already had one set of similar policies, one labor agreement, one central office and one Superintendent, the merger between the Essex Town and Chittenden Central is unique as it requires that 2 distinct and separate school organizations merge 2 distinctly and separate administrations, faculties, strategic plans and sets of school board policies.

Working together over the next 18 months will require all-hands on deck as the current administrative teams begins to draft a plan that creates common systems, community engagement opportunities, organizational efficiency and internal collaboration among employees. Beginning July 1, 2017, it's important that there be a competent and effective district leadership team, school board and Superintendent, who can effectively lead in this era of exciting transformation; a well thought out plan that is designed based on the needs of all our students at a cost that our three communities can support.

This was the right decision at the right time. I'm confident that kids and taxpayers will benefit from being part of the Essex-Westford School District.