

WHY DID HUNTINGTON VOTERS VOTE NO ON THE CHANGE OF GOVERNANCE TO ONE BOARD FOR THE ENTIRE CHITTENDEN EAST SUPERVISORY UNION

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Currently the voters in Huntington decided that it does not make sense for Huntington to dismantle its elementary school board and join with the Mount Mansfield Modified Union School District

Background:

Huntington does not qualify for the small school grant. Huntington does not have phantom students.

Huntington projected population remains relatively constant at about 140 to 145 students. Entering class sizes by age fluctuate between 18-31 students each year. Projected eligible 3 yr olds & fall 4 year olds are 31 for FY 15-16 and 24 for FY 16-17. These student populations are from a community of approximately 2000 people.

The current Funding Formula issue in Huntington:

A FY 2016 projected budget reduction of -3.81% would increase Huntington property taxes \$58.85 per \$100,000. A budget reduction of -2.18% which includes adding 12 Preschool Partnerships, Huntington property taxes would increase \$45.18 per \$100,000. A budget with no dollar increase that includes the cost of 12 new Preschool Partnerships would increase property taxes \$60.00 per \$100,000.

Why people in Huntington voted no to eliminating their local elementary school board and joining a Unified District:

1. **No Cost savings; merger would actually increase costs** – Prior to saving any money, Huntington property taxpayers would have to pick up the costs from other towns, then the savings would be getting rid of those costs that were never Huntington's to begin with. The residents of Huntington would have been responsible for their share of \$7 million of debt from the other grade schools in exchange for the other districts sharing Huntington's \$400,000 in debt.
2. **Top down versus bottom up management / Loss of contact with the community** - A fifteen person board with 2 representatives for Huntington was not deemed able to adequately monitor 1 high school, 2 middle schools and up to 6 elementary schools. The result would be top down governance with a heavy reliance on CESU administration. Huntington voters believe the different areas of expertise and different outlooks of their five elected board members to the elementary school board were an enhancement to, not detraction from, the operation of the school. Community members stated they would not be comfortable traveling one or two towns away to bring their concerns about their school to people they've never met who are unfamiliar with the school and the community.

3. **The loss of the school portion Town Meeting** - Huntington voters believe in scrutinizing their town and grade school budgets and asking questions at Town Meeting, where, if necessary, amendments to the budget can be made. This would no longer occur under a single governance structure which requires Australian balloting.
4. **The ability to refuse certain services from CESU would be lost** i.e. the taxpayers would be forced to pay for non-essential services that are not wanted, nor used.
Ex. Huntington has had local “farm to school” and healthy eating menus for more than 20 years. This lunch program has been documented in local papers and has been a model for other districts. CESU hired a District Food Services Coordinator. Huntington voters felt that was a redundant position in our school and has opted out of paying for it. This would not be an option if Huntington joined the merged district.
Ex. The Building & Grounds Coordinator. Huntington voters have been grumbling about the benefit of this position. Currently we share costs for this position. This decision will be reevaluated. A discussion of the merits of this position to our grade school will probably occur in the next fiscal year.
5. **The lack of public pre-school in three of the merging districts – 2 reasons .**
 - a. **Cost** - Huntington has had public preschool for 4 year olds and EEE students for at least 16 years. The two wealthiest towns in the district have, just in the last 2 years, provided a handful of preschool slots (5 at Underhill Central and EEE students at Jericho Elementary). The rest of the populace in their towns was required to private pay. With the new preschool legislation, \$3000 vouchers will need to be added.. for 2015/16 109 preschool slots were added in the modified union. Historically Huntington already had 28 slots budgeted for 4yr olds, 5 yr olds & EEE children. So if Huntington had joined the merger it would pick up its share of costs associated with 109 new Preschool partnerships (\$327,000) from other districts in exchange for the other districts sharing the cost of Huntington’s 12 new Preschool Partnerships (\$36,000).
 - b. **Philosophy** – the two communities who determined that providing public preschool to their communities was not an educational priority through their annual budgeting process - control 8 of the 15 votes on the new board. They are also the wealthiest of the 5 communities. This was interpreted as an indication that their philosophies and budgeting priorities may in the future conflict with those smaller communities with lower socio-economic status.
6. **Curriculum innovation** – the belief that curriculum innovation would be encouraged in a way that the most students could take advantage, i.e. the larger, more wealthy communities vs. the smaller, poorer, more remote communities:
 - a. about 15 years ago Huntington began exposing their elementary students to foreign language. We continued this even though there was no foreign language available until the 7th grade in the district. It took approximately 10 years before some of other elementary districts in the supervisory added foreign language to their curricula.
 - b. Mini nutrition classes
 - c. Accelerated reading classes for Kindergarteners run by the Librarian & parent volunteers

- d. Huntington was one of the first schools in the district to have the 4 Winds environmental program
7. **The decision to close a school taken from the community's voters and given to those towns with the largest population base.** The effect on property values for Huntington without a grade school
8. **The modified union board has the authority to redraw boundary lines and to determine which school a student will attend.** The closest schools to Huntington are in Richmond. We currently bus 5th through 8th graders there with a ride time of approximately **one hour one way**. The potential for this was deemed **unacceptable for 3 through 9 year olds**.
9. **By law a Supervisory Union is required to provide a number of services.** Because Huntington's grade school is still part of the Supervisory Union, we still receive services and still pay our allocated share, so **there would be no loss of services when voting no**.
10. **Educational improvement – there was no analysis that a change in governance would improve educational outcomes –**
 - a. Even with a free and reduced lunch population ranging from 24 to 28 percent, Huntington's test scores remain on par to wealthier towns in the district.
 - b. Huntington received recognition for reducing the educational gap between free and reduced lunch children and the other children in the school. It was felt this attention to the Huntington population's specific needs would be lost when budget priorities were set by the larger, wealthier communities.
 - c. There has been a curriculum coordinator for a number of years. Huntington will continue to receive services to keep their curriculum in line with the other grade schools in the district
11. **Uneasiness about building use – there were no definitive plans for building closure, and “re-purposing” of buildings –** because these decisions would be made by the 15 person board after the merger. There was innuendo – technical center, magnet school. It was necessary for the voter to stop and ask **why these innovations weren't currently underway in a district where all schools are under capacity**. The answer I derived was that the cost to the taxpayer outweighed the benefit to the district's students. **A change in governance will not reduce the costs of conversion and operating a new technical center or magnet school**

It should be noted that as the student population of Chittenden East Supervisory Union has decreased, the size of the Central Office staff has increased. Voting to merge all districts under one governance structure would decrease the central office staff by the portion of Supervisory services offered by the Assistant Superintendent / Curriculum Director and potentially a part time bookkeeping position.

After the MMU budget was defeated in 2014, the proposed position for Assistant to the Food Service Coordinator was cut.

In recent years a Human Resources Coordinator and a Buildings and Grounds Coordinator were added. There is Superintendent, a Curriculum Coordinator/ Assistant Superintendent, a Nursing Services Coordinator, a District Technology Coordinator with seven support personnel, a Business Manager with

3 support personnel, a Special Services Director (it should be noted there used to be two, now there is one), a District Food Service Coordinator and 5 Administrative / Secretarial staff

The change in governance in the Chittenden East Supervisory Union has not reduced costs. It has merely reallocated more expensive districts' costs to less expensive districts. The Mount Mansfield Modified Union School District has a **2.94% increase for FY 2015/16**

According to the minutes of their meeting increased **cost drivers** are:

3% wage increase - 34%

Pre K partnerships - 24%

Health care premiums up 4.5%

Health care coverage changes - 15% (new carrier offers more services)

Buildings and grounds - 8%

Special ed - 4.03%

Transportation including 3rd bus purchase - 7%

Utilities - 3%

These increases were offset by staff reductions, bond retirement, reductions in food service support.

A change in governance does not address these annual cost drivers.

By joining the Modified Union Huntington taxpayers would have been in a worse fiscal position.

My opinion / observation:

Blanket policies are a disservice to the children and the taxpayers of Vermont. If the legislature is looking at **cutting the costs** of education, and having more dollars spent directly on children's education **it will not be accomplished by creating larger bureaucracies.** There are school districts with stable populations out there and this idea that consolidating governance is The Answer is false.

The legislature slowed down conversations between communities about merging school districts and **increased the cost of education to all taxpayers by handing out small school grants and by creating formulas resulting in "phantom students".**

I hope the Vermont Department of Education follows through on the plan to discuss each school's viability with it's local board and present options to those boards. For isolated districts I hope the plan does not involve increased time spent on a bus, but rather more innovative ideas, perhaps interactive online classrooms w/ a teacher on site as a support teacher to aid all grade levels.

In all these conversations, I noticed **there does not appear to be talk about downsizing the Vermont Department of Education which at roughly 240 employees would mean one employee devoted to each school district in Vermont.**