

Feb. 4, 2015

Testimony to House Education Committee

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Elementary School board chair and CESU merger committee member

RE: Property Taxes AND Education Spending.

### **Are School consolidations a solution to the high cost of schools?**

It is no secret that the reason we are discussing Education, and particularly educational costs, is the public outcry about "unaffordable" property taxes. One of the "cost cutting strategies" receiving a great deal of attention is the idea of consolidation. What is driving this idea?

- (1) To some, this means having larger regional districts with fewer superintendents: the reduction of superintendents should mean cost savings.
- (2) To others, it means closing small schools and consolidating the students into fewer buildings. Fewer school buildings and teachers should yield cost savings. But transportation costs, loss of a key community gathering place and long bus rides for young children are big questions there.
- (3) Finally, to others consolidation means merging school districts within supervisory unions, eliminating town school boards and dissolving supervisory unions. This plan retains superintendents, who would work with just one unified school board. The idea here is to foster efficiency at the superintendent's office, allowing for consolidating schools and sharing staff as needed. This last concept is the one adopted by Chittenden East SU.

### **Why did Huntington vote against the CESU Modified Unified Merger?**

I am here as a school board member, chair of the Huntington elementary school board, as well as a member of the Chittenden East SU Merger Study Committee. I authored the Minority Report on pages 35-42 of the CESU Modified Unified Union #12 Report/Plan in which I explained why I was not in favor of the Merger Plan as written. I am here to share some perspectives on why Huntington voted 2:1 against the proposed merger. I want to qualify my comments at the outset with one important note: Even though I opposed the merger plan that was approved by a majority of our supervisory union towns, I accept the sentiments of that majority and hope that the new modified union will be a positive opportunity for them. Huntington's elementary school remains a member of the supervisory union, and we continue to see ourselves as part of the larger community of schools in our SU. As a representative of the Huntington community, I intend to continue to be good neighbor, working in good faith with other CESU schools for the betterment of all our schools and communities.

To understand why our community did not embrace the merger, I'll begin by saying that people in Huntington actively engaged with each other on the question of what would be best, and attended many local forums where many

thoughtful questions and considerations were discussed. In the end, a majority of Huntingtonians were simply unconvinced of any benefit, financially or educationally, and were therefore not willing to jeopardize the good system now in place. The vote was a statement of support for our school, our staff and our community.

### **Why not just go along with it?**

As a citizen of Huntington, with friends in other CESU towns, I had every reason to want to preserve the collaborative spirit between our towns. Voting ourselves "off of the island" was not a good feeling. So why did we vote no? Here are some of the reasons, perceptions, and fears shared by people in our town:

1. Huntington has a great elementary school, a hub of community activity and the **place where many families get to know each other** when their children are young.
2. Parents of young children value being in the same town, making **volunteering in the classroom and attending school programs** more possible.
3. The **bus ride** may be long within town, but the possibility of very young children being forced into even longer bus rides to the next town twice a day is unacceptable to most folks. A merger opens that as an option.
4. Brewster Pierce has initiated some very good programs on its own at various times over the years, including a foreign language program and an exemplary food service program, the envy of many other schools. **Our autonomy allowed us to follow our own best ideas, and set a good example for other schools.** We value the balance between collaboration and independence.
5. People in Huntington currently have 7 school board members with whom they can talk about school issues. They bring a wide variety of talents and insights to the 2 boards. These volunteers are our neighbors whom we see in our day-to-day lives, so **board members "know" the community and its concerns.** **Eliminating these boards**, to be replaced by one single unified board with limited representation, **will reduce access to school policy-making, with meetings held in towns as much as an hour away among people who seldom come all the way down to Huntington, don't know the community, and are not familiar with our school.**
6. **The combined budget** may be easier for the Central Office to follow, but the small individual schools like Brewster Pierce will face uncertainty as the needs of all the elementary and high schools are placed into the same budget. **How will**

**things be prioritized**, when high school sports and elementary foreign language are scrambling for the same dollars?

7. Huntington has kept its per pupil spending in check, and has a history of community support for the budget. We value the **respectful relationship** that **thoughtfully supports the budget process** now in place.

8. In our current system, **our local school selects staff**. In a unified district, teachers "RIF-ed" from one school will be guaranteed first choice on a similar position opening in another school. This is good for teachers, but it may not be the best fit for each school.

I invite you to read the Minority Report for a full discussion of the inadequacies of the Merger Plan, including why more thorough questions, considerations and data should have been included in this state-funded report which argues for a governance change that will, by the way, cost the State of Vermont close to \$2 million after all the tax incentives and transition grants have been paid.

Footnote: The proposed FY16 budget for the new MMM union school district has been formulated, and the budget is going up, not down, but because of the incentives, taxes will go down for the merging districts. Property owners in those CESU towns will see reduced tax bills next year and the subsequent 3 years, but the state will foot the bill.

Study Process. As a member of the merger study committee, I began with an open mind, ready to study the problem with diligence and an open mind. Unfortunately, the process became a missed opportunity to do a meaningful analysis of whether a merger would be beneficial and cost effective for our school system. There was a lack of scientific process, an inadequate timeline and a failure to develop a focused strategy for gathering data. Many questions were left unanswered. In the end, even Merger advocates agreed that there was no guarantee that there would be savings from a merger.

The "evidence" for educational benefits was offered with enthusiasm, but in the end was speculative and unsubstantiated.

## A COUPLE QUESTIONS TO PONDER

### **Q1. Is the definition of "cost per pupil" understood by lawmakers?**

COST PER PUPIL calculations are used to quantify education costs.

The formula for counting pupils to get a COST PER PUPIL employs many "equalizing" factors, but in the process obscures what is actually being spent per child. For example, all other things being equal, one elementary student does NOT EQUAL one high school student when counting students for COST PER PUPIL calculations. One high school student is counted as 1.13 where one elementary student is counted as 1. **Is this putting elementary schools at a disadvantage, and is this modified calculation now being used to justify the closure of local elementary schools?**

A COST PER PUPIL of \$10,000 represents a different value depending on if it is for an elementary population or a high school population. \$10,000 per child in an elementary budget is calculated at \$10,000 COST PER PUPIL. But \$10,000 per teenager in the high school budget calculates out to only \$8850 in the COST PER PUPIL calculation. Elementary schools must budget 13% MORE to show the same COST PER PUPIL as the high school budgets.

This inequality in the calculation must be more thoroughly understood by decision-makers who are basing their concern on PER PUPIL SPENDING numbers. Does the current ratio fairly and accurately consider the current educational mandates and policies? Does it contribute to a false understanding of what our actual costs per students are?

### **Q2. Are the costs of education out of control, or is something else going on that's skewing our perception of the cost of education?**

I appreciated the testimony (Jan 16, 2015) offered by Paul Cillo of Public Assets Institute, regarding the perceived rise in property taxes:

Mr. Cillo presented a chart showing that "...(When) adjusted for inflation, since 2010 there has been no real increase in school property taxes..."

Mr. Cillo pointed out that, in spite of the rise in per pupil spending, the proportion of all taxes raised in Vermont for public education has remained about the same, hovering at around 50%.

(See more at: <http://publicassets.org/blog/testimony-to-house-education-committee-011615/#sthash.1DIEFvH7.dpuf>)