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Brattleboro

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Good Afternoon.

Thank you for agreeing to hear my perspective on our schools. I hope to make three points with you today, and I apologize for the trees that were sacrificed to provide the paper for my documents.

My first point is illustrated by the charts on the first page- There is no guarantee that savings or academic improvement will result from eliminating some or many of our small schools and transitioning our Supervisory Unions into Supervisory Districts, as proposed by H.361. The assumption that money will be saved is further undermined by Agency of Education data showing that five of the eleven existing Supervisory Districts such as this bill promotes spend above the state average, while half the K-12 districts operating within supervisory unions spend under the state average. The announcement yesterday that two of our small high schools, Cabot and Twinfield, were awarded Personalized Learning Initiative grants by the New England Secondary School Consortium, indicates there are a many factors to consider beyond size and structure.

My second point is that the primary driver of school spending is poverty.

As you can see from P.2, Brattleboro has a lot of students coming from impoverished homes. Page 3 shows many of them have no home at all.

Page 4 shows one of the effects of having so many needy children in our schools.

STEP services refers to our program that supports integrating students with

emotional and behavioral challenges into regular classrooms. It includes in-class support, an alternate setting when needed, and training for staff to enhance their ability to work effectively with these children.

Page 5 describes the reality for the families who will be sending children to our schools in the near future. Our town district oversees the Head Start and Early Head Start programs and has supported other qualified pre-schools from our budget for many years. The arrows indicate areas where services exist that might ameliorate these conditions. I will speak to these and other services a little later.

Page 6 and 7 show one measure of what we have been doing. You can see all lines are rising, and the achievement gap between income levels and disability levels has narrowed significantly. The data stops at 2012 because the department stopped sending AYP numbers, so the only recent data I can share is that our smallest school, Oak Grove, with 125 students, scored highest in the state on the NECAP's last year.

Pages 8 and 9 are two graphs from the parent surveys we did during parent conferences this year. As you can see, important statements about our school community and academic programs received overwhelming positive responses from our parents.

So how do we do it? Page 10 indicates part of the answer. This is from our Town Report, and the staff list is actually two pages long. Missing are 38 administrators, classroom teachers, and academic support staff from Academy School. You will notice at the bottom of the page that we have 40 fewer actual students this year- a drop of over 5%.

If you turn to Page 11, you will see that our proposed budget (we vote at a Representative Town Meeting on Saturday, March 21) is down by \$55,000. But our education spending is up because we applied \$500,000 from our reserve fund

last year. Most importantly, I believe, is that our equalized pupil count has increased. This indicates that despite our reduction of 40 students, the number of our students coming from poverty has increased, driving our budget up.

When I look at this budget data, and the long list of adults required to make sure these children learn the skills and habits they will need to overcome the cycle of poverty, I find very convincing evidence that poverty is what is driving our budgets up.

This brings me to my third point- meaningful reductions in school costs will only be achieved by a tightly organized, closely monitored collaboration of all the institutions currently engaged in helping citizens in poverty, including our public schools.

There are organizations and agencies across the state trying to do some of this, but so far the efforts remain unconnected, ineffective, and wasteful. Pages 12 and 13 come from an organization in Bellows Falls which is located next to the Central Elementary School and provides an indication of the range of services available in that small town. These many resources across the state need to be delivered through an organized and effective model, with close oversight from the State to assure that agencies are truly collaborating, engaging with other organizations, and providing the supports people need to get out of poverty. The current system still seems inefficient despite recent improvements, and certainly not yet up to the task if our growing student numbers are any indication. The concept of "wrap-around" services has been understood for decades, yet it still is not being applied effectively. If we can work with families to help them work their way out of poverty, we can begin reducing the number of employees schools require to educate our children. This is the only way forward. Cutting and reducing and consolidating without dealing with the real problem will only damage our schools

and weaken our communities, and not save any money.

As for what to do about the schools, Page 14 lists the goals currently included in H. 361, and a clause calling on the SBE and Sec of Ed to develop performance measures for these goals. This seems to me an excellent basis for moving forward: develop measures for the goals; apply them over the next two to three years to every school district across the state, look at the results and see who is not measuring up, and direct the supports and sanctions to the areas that truly need improvement.

Please don't create a law that requires Brattleboro and the other towns in our SU and around the state to spend the next years proving we know what we are doing and are doing it well. That would be a waste.

Thank you.