

House Education Committee Testimony
January 23, 2019
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Mill River Unified Union School District

House Education Committee Members,

As I reflect on our transition as a unified district from proposal to approval to operational, there are several key elements worth discussing:

Timeline

State Board of Education approval of proposal	November 2015
Community vote in support of merger	March 2016
District Organizational Meeting	April 2016
Unified District fully operational	July 2016

Budget Development

Part of our merger design included the concept of developing our local budgets for FY17 as we had done in the past. This was due to not knowing whether unification would be approved on Town Meeting Day. If merger was approved - those budgets would be rolled into an overarching unified budget with funds allocated to their local designations. If merger was not approved - those budgets would stand alone. This allowed us to enter our first year of operation focused on systems and internal processes to support our unification effort. When we began developing our first officially unified budget for FY18 we had the systems, mindset and experience in place to support that process more effectively.

Urgency and Necessity

Our experience included a Transition Board being put in place in the spring of 2016 as we charged into the July operational period. During this time, our five local boards and our SU Board continued to function, but those functions diminished over time in a logical and natural fashion. As the Transition Board took on more future oriented work, the work of the local boards adjusted accordingly. This period of operating a transition board and local boards can be inherently tricky when it comes to questions of who decides what and when. In this case, the urgency and necessity of our impending operational date in July was a significant asset. We would have been far less effective had we been thrust into a 12-15 month period of transition, as competing interests and goals could easily have gotten in the way. We were “all hands on deck” and would have it no other way.

Business Office and Legal Functions

Our Business Office (which has the smallest staff of any comparable districts in our region) managed the process of creating the new entity and closing outgoing entities very effectively. This process was less complicated than we expected it to be, although attention to detail was key. We did find the AOE to be unprepared to help navigate early mergers through business transitions due to the fact that few individuals at the AOE had been

through the experience previously. We also found that the three month transition time we had was more than enough time to work with local attorneys to navigate the property transitions and deed work that had to occur. This realm, for us, was all about focused effort and managing timelines.

Benefits - Tangible and Intangible

We see significant benefit to unification. We save money every year (average since merger has included \$250,000-\$800,000 surplus at budget end). Those savings generally emerge through operational efficiencies in the buildings and grounds realm (through staffing, purchasing, etc.) and better use of our staff across the district in order to ensure that adults are where the students need them to be, and in the correct allocations. Overall, our budgets totaled \$22M prior to unification and our FY20 budget totals \$17.5M. Bearing in mind that some of that discrepancy can be attributed to SU assessments in the old local budgets, our actual annual savings that we do not need to ask taxpayers for have continued to be in that \$250K to \$800K range.

Additionally, the opportunities presented to us as a unified entity are unprecedented in our community. We are currently engaged in Board-level strategic planning for the future, which we found logical to delay until our system infrastructure and staffing levels were in a place that we felt were ideal. We have developed a multi-year initiative that we call the Trailhead Project, which is intended to enhance programming at each of our local schools within the proficiency-context while highlighting the unique nature of each school, attracting outside students, and maximizing internal elementary school choice. Merger had us working hard to create efficiency through consistent systems and structures. With those now in place, our schools are better able to consistently move our learners toward proficiency through visionary efforts such as our Trailhead Project..

We also are once again seeing real estate ads trumpeting “Mill River Schools” in their sales pitches for homes, which has not occurred for roughly 20 years. This is largely because our board and administration are like-minded in terms of serving our community, and our educators have quality, well-articulated professional development and resources at their disposal that we create internally rather than outsourcing or relying on her entities. While some of these things are not necessarily unique to us, they are unprecedented in our community and are clear indicators of the strength and synergy that we have found through our unified efforts. We are especially proud of a strategic focus in our FY20 budget to enhance our high school arts programming and expand PreK programming to full day for 3 and 4 years olds with after school PreK care for each elementary school in our district. We are now asking our taxpayers to help us invest in our community’s future through these efforts and would not be in that place without unification.

Closing Thoughts

Productive change does not happen by accident - it needs to be designed. A sense of urgency and clarity helps with that process. Our unification effort benefited greatly from urgency and design, due to our self-imposed three month transition timeline. We would not do it any other way. We knew where we were going and took the steps to make it happen, which allowed us to become highly-functioning at a faster pace. Delay in implementation for us would have hurt our efforts significantly and drained our human resources of their potential for impact by scattering focus over a prolonged period of time. More time to complete a task does not always ensure that the task will be completed more effectively. We believe that clear parameters, wise design efforts, actual collaboration and legitimate urgency not only helped us to accomplish key objectives, but that each of those individual things serves to enhance and bolster the others in the process.