

**REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
STAMFORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, STAMFORD, VERMONT  
PROPOSED MERGER WITH CLARKSBURG, MASSACHUSETTS  
APRIL, 2019**

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak to you about the proposed Stamford, VT and Clarksburg, MA Interstate School Merger. It has been a very busy three months of investigation, led by Public Consulting Group (PCG).

PCG was hired by the Stamford, VT and Clarksburg, MA Interstate Merger Committee and began working on the feasibility study in January, 2019. The five key project members, Elizabeth Chmielewski, Project Manager; Anna d'Entermont, Project Lead; Christine Donis-Keller, Ph.D., Subject Matter Expert; Mary Ellen Hannon, District Leadership and Operations; and Morgan Hunter, Financial Analysis and Modeling, have worked diligently to gather information to inform and guide our districts decision making. The team has extensive educational analysis experience and represented a diverse mix of skills necessary for this project. PCG focused analysis on several key aspects related to each state that will need to be considered as part of this merger, and are outlined in this summation.

PCG gathered and analyzed data from diverse sources including:

- Central Office staff and other relevant stakeholder interviews;
- Document reviews of district policies and procedures, general operations, staff levels, academic achievement/curriculum, student services, transportation, facilities and financial information;
- Best practices review including both MA and VT state regulations;
- Stakeholder engagement by conducting focus groups and interviewing members of both communities.

The focus for all efforts was, and will continue to be, improving educational opportunity (academic and social) for all students. Both towns are committed to that being the driving force and main objective for exploring the merger.

**Student Enrollment**

The proposed merger would address the Towns declining enrollments by combining grades. The merger would allow the class numbers to remain in the most beneficial range of 20-22 students per grade with the addition of the school choice practice Clarksburg is already engaged in.

**Governance and Operations**

Vermont required Stamford to explore consolidation options to be compliant with Act 46. The belief is that by consolidating with Clarksburg, there will be efficiencies in governance and operations once the necessary structures are in place. The merger will require increased communication between both towns and significant time investment on the part of district leaders to ensure thoughtful integration.

Stakeholders expressed concern about how to merge the school boards to ensure decision-making parity between both towns. Community members stated they would not favor a merger if an out-clause was not included in the contract language.

**Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment**

It is an expressed hope that a merger may bring on expanded opportunities for project-based and diversified learning approaches, given the larger classes. An example would be a science and/or math fair and robotics program that is currently not realistic with classes of 3. Also, a

curriculum aligned to the Massachusetts State Frameworks would greatly benefit Stamford's students as the great majority (and most years, *all*) attending high schools in Massachusetts.

Current reading/writing programs and reading interventions have been compared between both schools. While there are similarities in writing, interventions and collaboration, there are gaps to be addressed such as a need to integrate the approach to tiered system of support, leadership for teaching and learning and assessments.

#### **School Culture and Extra-Curriculars**

A merger will allow for additional before and after-school programs and there is excitement over the potential for those opportunities. Clarksburg families are enthusiastic over the possibility of a public preschool.

Each school is viewed as the heart of their town and hold many community activities in their respective buildings. There is a strong desire to keep the schools the heart of each Town's identity.

#### **Finance**

While both communities hope a merger will bring cost savings, key differences exist:

1) accounting and funding approaches and requirements; 2) per pupil funding methodologies; 3) different retirement systems; 4) state funding mechanisms.

Stakeholders expressed a need to establish financial responsibilities related to school maintenance. The merger will not affect Stamford's higher tuition costs for the Massachusetts high schools. Stamford currently spends 1.5 times more than Clarksburg to tuition out students.

Residents in both towns are concerned the merger will negatively impact property taxes, already perceived as being too high. With respect to debt maintenance costs, best practice would be to continue to have funds reserved. Stamford currently works to anticipate future needs.

Both schools currently spend less per pupil than their respective state average. Clarksburg spends over \$1K more per student on direct instructional services such as teacher salaries, textbooks/supplies and technology. Stamford spends over \$1K more per student on non-instructional services such as a guidance counselor, nurse/health services, transportation, food services and building maintenance. Stamford's non-instructional service costs are higher than Clarksburg's on a per pupil basis, but lower on overall dollars spent.

#### **Facilities**

Stamford Elementary School appears well maintained and the building has recently upgraded windows, flooring, added security cameras and magnetic door closures. Grants for the security improvements.

Clarksburg School has significant building needs. Community members committed their time to make some needed repairs, there is \$500,000 appropriated in the MA state budget for the school roof and there is a hope that the merger will free up space to increase capacity to meet student needs. Clarksburg will need to address a heating system and plumbing upgrade.

#### **Personnel**

Staff from both schools expressed concerns regarding licensure requirements in VT and MA, how the merger would impact the existing collective bargaining agreements, longevity and job loss.

Stakeholders expressed hope that a merger would provide teachers with additional grade-level colleagues that would allow for more collaborative and reflective teaching practices. It is hoped

that the merger may allow the schools to create an instructional support layer for teachers including Professional Learning Communities and grade-level collaborative planning. Both states are members of the NASDTEC Interstate Agreement for Teacher Licensure which will simplify the process for certification. The Teacher Collective Bargaining Agreements are both negotiated by NEA organizations and both expire at the end of the current school year and are being negotiated. Both schools use part time staff to fill in non-core subject areas.

### **Special Populations**

Neither school currently has English Language Learners (ELL) students.

Clarksburg currently has 25% students on an IEP and Stamford has 9% of their total preK-12 student enrollment. The merger allows for additional specialized services to be offered. Service providers are shared throughout each school's district, and their time in each school is limited. There is also a belief there could be an alignment of vision for special education services. Both school communities have inclusive programming and wish to have additional social emotional programming.

### **Transportation**

Buses are the primary mode of transportation; there are no walkers.

The distance between the two school buildings is 3.8 miles, or 7 minutes by car. School start and dismissal times will need to be aligned to get students to each school building and ease transportation issues between both schools. Stakeholders do not want the length of time that students are on the bus to increase. Currently the longest route at either school is 30 minutes. A merger would necessitate opening negotiations with bus companies, remapping bus routes and accounting for student ride time, discussing special considerations for gravel roads and staggering start times which could result in cost savings.

### **Next Steps**

On March 29, 2019 Members of the VT Agency of Education joined a conference call that included a representative of the MA Department of Education. We discussed the preliminary summary of findings and discussed questions that participants had. Suggestions are being analyzed and the financial piece is being completed. The findings will culminate in a Recommendations Roadmap, which will be presented during a joint town informational meeting scheduled for May 15, 2019 in Clarksburg, MA.