

House Education Committee
January 29, 2019
Testimony from Cara Zimmerman

My name is Cara Zimmerman and I am Chair of the Stowe School District School Board, Vice-Chair of the Lamoille South Supervisory Union board, and Chair of the Lamoille South Unified Union Transition Board.

I am here today on behalf of all of the boards of the Lamoille South Supervisory Union to urge the legislature to provide those districts that have been ordered to merge by July 1, 2019 a one-year delay in implementation.

I want to begin by thanking you for your consideration of a one-year delay, and emphasizing that a delay is important because it would give us the time we need to provide the best services to our students, teachers, staff, and community members. The compressed timelines laid out in statute make it difficult to both appeal and comply with the law. In particular, the LSSU faced uncertainty as to the State Board's decision until the last possible day giving us an even shorter window to prepare for a possible merger. Currently, we are moving forward on a dual path -- both preparing to merge, and preparing for operations in our current structure to reduce the likelihood of harm should we successfully appeal our case. We are doing all of this while also trying to keep normal operations on track. This is extremely challenging.

I would like to take the remainder of my time to share with you what we are seeing and experiencing as school board members implementing a forced merger in this tight timeframe. Our primary concern is the impact on our students. Specifically, we are concerned that we do not have enough time to plan for our summer programs and meals for students. In order to properly plan for the summer, we need clarity regarding which fiscal entity (Stowe School District, Elmore-Morristown Unified Union School District, or a newly formed fiscal entity - the Lamoille South Unified Union School District) should be applying for federal grants, hiring employees, and so forth. We are not likely to get that clarity from the legal appeal until May at the earliest. Preparation is particularly important in Morristown where more students are eligible for free and reduced lunch and many students participate in 21st Century grant-funded summer programs. Locally this program is known as UnBound. It is also important in Stowe where we are currently working with Elmore-Morristown to offer summer meals for all students in the region and to expand summer programs for students in need of additional academic supports. We would hate to see these programs compromised in any way due to the current state of confusion and uncertainty.

In addition, we need to be ready to pay employees on July 1. In order to do so, we must have systems set up and tested, well ahead of time, to make sure that we take care of our teachers and staff.

We are also concerned about the impact of this compressed timeline on community support for our schools, which will ultimately impact students. Community support is an essential ingredient

for student success and excellent schools. And, we believe that communities support their schools when they understand what is going on with them. The rushed nature of this merger makes it difficult to effectively provide the information that the community needs in the small window of time we were given. We have many votes coming up that are critically important for our schools -

- February 26 - vote on the proposed amendments for the Articles of Agreement;
- March 4 - petitions due for school board seats for newly formed Lamoille South Unified Union School District;
- March 5 - vote on open board seats for the Stowe School Board (EMUU to do the same) AND district budgets;
- April 9 - vote for the board members for newly formed Lamoille South Unified Union board;
- May 23 - information meeting for newly formed LSUU budget
- May 28 - vote on budget for LSUU

We are concerned that our community members will have difficulty navigating the multiple votes necessary to both continue as separate school districts should we successfully appeal the decision, and comply with the law. The dual process is lengthy, confusing, and frustrating. We are worried that taxpayers will take this frustration to the ballot box, which will result in program cuts for students. Frustration with the decision and process were evident even at our Organizational Meeting where some citizens voted against every single article, even adjournment.

In addition, the merger will result in increased tax rates for Morristown and Elmore, and a decrease in Stowe. This is without any increases or changes in opportunities for students because we operate two parallel K-12 systems that do not share students. A tax increase in two of the three communities adds pressure to oppose budgets and cut programs. As an aside our high schools are over 12 miles apart, beyond the threshold of geographic isolation as defined by the Vermont State Board of Ed. Sharing resources is challenging whether we merge or not. We have significant facilities needs in both districts, but Stowe's needs are larger than EMUU's needs. We estimate facilities needs in Stowe costing around \$24 million. This will add further tax pressure on EMUU taxpayers and schools without benefits to their students, or alternatively will drive program cuts.

Finally, this process is all-consuming. The compressed time frame for this forced merger has consumed 100% of board and administrative attention, taking our focus away from important priorities like the on-going implementation of PBL and social justice initiatives.

In the Lamoille South Supervisory Union we understand the importance of working together regionally, and are committed to doing so. But, we need a process and a timeframe that allows us to do so in ways that benefit students and learning. The forced merger process, especially when you compare it to the voluntary process with which we are familiar, does not allow for positive, proactive planning or even a sustained focus on students and learning. A delay will

allow time to plan for merged operations in ways that include clear communications, thoughtful plans, and community engagement while the legal questions are resolved. Our experience with the Elmore-Morristown merger tells us that even if the forced merger moves forward, we won't have adequate time to properly implement it by July 1, 2019. We are **not** confident that the court will resolve our legal appeal by July 1, and even less confident that it will be resolved in time to provide a smooth course for summer programs and a smooth start of operations.