

White River Valley Supervisory Union

To: Vermont House Education Committee

From: Bruce Labs, Superintendent of the White River Valley SU

Re: Budgets Defeated on Town Meeting Day for FY 2021

Date: April 24th, 2020

Dear House Education Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Education Committee regarding those 19 districts that currently have had budgets defeated on town meeting day this year.

I would like to specifically speak to you about two of my SU districts that were not able to pass their budgets on town meeting day, the District of Strafford and the First Branch School District (Tunbridge and Chelsea). I would like to also speak on behalf of two additional districts, the Rochester and Stockbridge school district and Granville and Hancock School district which had originally scheduled their school district votes in May. The likelihood of their voting being delayed beyond June 30th is looking more and more possible because of the COVID-19 emergency in effect at this time.

All four of the boards involved have been waiting to figure out how to proceed since Governor Scott issued the “Stay at Home, Stay Safe” order on March 24th, 2020 and extended it to May 15th, 2020. We were then told by the Secretary of State’s office that if we were planning on holding budget votes in April or in May we should cancel those votes. As time has passed and there is no end in sight to this emergency it has become clear that we will need extraordinary help in order to hold a vote and pass a budget by June 30th 2020.

Although we are happy for the Senate Education Committees action to lend support to our districts during this emergency to level funding at 2020 levels, that approach does not go far enough to help us without additional hardship to each of our districts.

I would like to offer the following description of the hardships these districts face without additional actions by the House Education Committee.

1) Strafford and First Branch Districts both that lost their budget vote in March are now prepared to go forward with lower budget numbers to present to the town. However, they want very much to be able to stand in front of the taxpayers and have a conversation about what is needed to run the schools for the next year in each district. It is traditional for these districts to vote from the floor. It is not preferable to have them vote in an Australian ballot method of voting by mail which would limit the voters from being able to get answers for questions about the budget.

2) School board members in each district are confident that budgets would have passed in each town if they had had a better, more articulated presentation the first time the vote was taken and failed. The boards are very confident that, if given the opportunity to speak with the taxpayers, the budgets will pass especially since they have lowered the budget numbers this time around.

3) With the ever worsening economy brought about by the rapid onset of the COVID-19 crisis, we find ourselves in a changing financial situation especially for these school districts as well as for the State of Vermont in general. With the reports of a deficit in the Educational Fund growing, there is a sense of urgency to overcome the worsening economy. To have to level fund each of these districts is to cut staff and services to our children more than we already have. This would be a dire outcome for our children.

4) Our district boards believe that the deficit in the Educational Fund cannot be made up solely at the bargaining table as has been implied by the VSBA. This will

take a systemic and coordinated statewide approach. We will need leadership for this and each district should not be expected to shoulder the burden on their own.

5) Both the district of Strafford and the First Branch District are towns that offer choice beyond the 8th grade, the Rochester and Stockbridge school district offers choice beyond 6th grade and Granville and Hancock have full choice.

Unfortunately, they have little control over high school tuition costs. There are also many costs that are passed on like health insurance costs and salary increases that the districts can't control year to year. Level funding is not a satisfactory solution for these districts.

An Approach for Your Consideration:

- Our school boards are asking for the Senate to consider a level funded budget from FY 2020 with an inflator of between 3% and 4%. This inflator is critical because it addresses, at least partially, the increased costs school districts have to face because of things out of their control such as rising tuition costs.
- Allow us to have spending authority for FY 21 beyond June 30th so that we can hold floor votes and present the budget to voters in the traditional manner when it is safe to do so.
- There is a sense of urgency now because the longer we wait without more clarity will jeopardize the chance of passing this new lower budget that we are putting forward to the voters.
- I need not remind you that the schools in each of our communities are the lifeblood of our society and have to be supported. The COVID-19 emergency could not be anticipated.
- The communities in the Districts of White River Valley have a large percentage of families living in poverty. Equity and educational opportunity are vital in our state. We must protect our most vulnerable economically disadvantaged families especially at this time.

On behalf of the children in the District of Strafford and the First Branch School District, we the school boards ask for your consideration in helping us to overcome our new financial burdens brought on by this Covid-19 crisis. Please work with us to move forward in this challenging time.