

March 13, 2019

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

Julia Callan, Chair

Sheldon School Board

Dear Senate Education Committee members,

I am writing to provide testimony in support of a 1-year delay of Act 46 mergers. Sheldon Elementary School was ordered by the State Board of Education (SBE) to merge with the Northern Mountain Valley Unified Union School District (NMV), with a resulting merger of Sheldon, Montgomery, Bakersfield and Berkshire. As a result of this merger, the SBE also ordered that Sheldon be moved into the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU).

The Sheldon School Board steadfastly supports the Alternative Governance Structure (AGS) which we developed with our colleagues in Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union (Franklin, Highgate, Swanton) (FNWSU). We value our collaboration with our colleagues so much so in fact that we proposed during our testimony to the SBE that the SBE consider merger structures such as a 3 by 1, which would maintain Sheldon within FNWSU. A significant reason for our concerns around SU movement, is that remaining in FNWSU would have allowed us to strengthen our collaboration and build on our successes with our colleagues in FNWSU. Over the years a number of functions have been moved from the local schools to the Supervisory Union, resulting in a reliance on the strength of our Central Office. As well as a commitment from the local schools to work collaboratively to maintain a highly skilled and efficient Central Office to provide guidance and direction to our local schools. Some of the functions that are overseen by the Central Office staff include, transportation, student support services and special education, human resources, business management and technology.

Due to the merger imposed by the SBE, Sheldon is now in a situation in which we will be merging not only our school governance, but by changing SU's – our school management as well. Below I have outlined some of the most challenging aspects of completing a merger by June 30th.

Supervisory Union Staff

It is highly concerning to our board that there is no guidance from the State on the fate of our Sheldon staff who are employed by FNWSU. This includes our Special Educators, Speech and Language Pathologists, and School Psychologist, who represent 1/3 of Sheldon Staff and serve our most vulnerable populations. It appears as though these professionals will need to be re-hired by FNESU, assuming they wish to remain with Sheldon, and assuming they are released from their obligations in FNWSU. It is unclear whether they will maintain their seniority, sick leave salary schedule, structure of their position.

Technology

All of our technology will need to be migrated to FNESU, and most of this work cannot occur during the school year. Requiring this to be completed in one summer will come at a significant cost as either district employees or an outside contractor will need to be retained to complete this work over the summer. Sheldon utilizes a shared server with Missisquoi Valley Union High School (MVU), which is housed at MVU, and our school website is also supported by FNWSU. These components will need to be carefully merged to FNESU. Sheldon/FNWSU uses a Gmail system (Google domain) and relies heavily on google docs, and shared work products with all of FNWSU. This is not the same system that FNESU uses. Additionally, we are a 1:1 technology school (grades 3-6) and therefore all student devices and saved student portfolio work will also have to be saved and merged.

Student Support Services

Sheldon/FNWSU uses GoalView for creation and maintenance of Student IEP's, however FNESU uses Sped Doc. This will require all student IEPs to be re-created in Sped Doc, it is unclear who would be recreating these documents and in what time frame.

Human Resources

It has been reported to our board that VEHI is still determining the best way to transition an entire school to a new employer while maintaining insurance plans and ensuring coverage. Further it is also unclear what agreement will be made between FNESU and Sheldon Staff in terms of accrued sick leave and seniority. Additionally, all 35 of our staff members will need to be transitioned to the FNESU human resources system, a large undertaking in a relatively short period of time.

Pre School Structure and Curriculum

Sheldon's current preschool program is a FNWSU collaboration Maple Run Supervisory Union. Moving to FNESU will require the transition from an SU administered program to a program in which the building principal is the administrator. It is unclear if our current preschool teachers would transition with Sheldon and if the structures (including curriculum and staffing) would be in place in time for the start of the 2019/2020 school year.

Sheldon's curriculum is driven by our collaborations at the SU level, and therefore will need to be transitioned to the current structures in FNESU. It will take time for the counterparts in each SU to educate each other and take the necessary steps to ensure integrity as our curriculum is integrated with FNESU.

Summer Programming and Grant Funding

Sheldon's summer tutoring and programming as well as our after-school programming is funded in part through grants at the SU level. Without thoughtful transition of these programs, Sheldon as well as the remaining FNWSU schools risk not being able to offer programming at the same

level. Both SU's should be afforded the time necessary to make these transitions without large impacts to both budgets and programs.

We believe that with such a massive structural change it is in the best interest of not only Sheldon, but also the affected SU's of FNWSU and FNESU to allow for a 1-year merger delay in order to provide enough time to plan and implement a successful transition. The task at hand will require collaboration between our local school and both SU's and a June 30th deadline is simply not enough time to get the structures in place to successfully merge and transition all of the components. I believe that the legislature is trying to act in the best interest of students and therefore implore you to support this delay thereby allowing districts to carry out this intent in a thoughtful manner.

Respectfully,

Julia Callan, Chair

Sheldon School Board of Directors