

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 emphasize 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 for our school boards and administration, and confusing for our electorate.

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. Over the course of three months we will have had four votes that impact our schools - we have worked tirelessly to educate our electorate about the ballot issues but, despite our best efforts, our electorate is still incredibly confused. Here is our election timeline ---

February 26 - voted on the proposed amendments for the Articles of Agreement;
March 4 - petitions were due for school board seats for newly formed Lamoille South Unified Union School District (LSUU);
March 5 - voted on open board seats for the Stowe School Board (EMUU did 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 are frustrated and confused by this forced merger process, and therefore will not engage in the merged budget process. This lack of engagement and understanding could result in our merged budget not passing and therefore could cause undue harm to our students. Frustration with the decision and process were evident even at our Organizational Meeting. One community member commented that she was on the school board during the formation of the LSSU and noted that that formation process seems easy compared to the lift we have in front of us now to merge these two school districts into a unified union school district. Frustration and confusion was also apparent at the informational meeting we held before our vote on the proposed amendments to the Articles of Agreement. We need to have some time to educate our community members about the merger so, should it come to pass, we have our communities behind us. The lift for us is so big because we have already wrung out all of the benefits and efficiencies that some communities may be realizing in their newly formed school districts. We will not realize those benefits through a forced merger so we need time to double down on where we can leverage benefits for our students in a less than optimal governance structure. We need to be able to identify where and how our students can benefit from a merged school district so that we can build support for the merger within our communities. Community buy-in is essential to the success of any merger in our region.

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 PK-12 systems that do not share students. A tax increase in two of the three communities adds pressure to oppose budgets and cut programs. We also 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. A one-year delay would give us a year to plan for a merged budget - all

of our goal setting, meeting agendas, budget building meetings, etc. could position us to pass a merged budget that reflects the priorities of both communities. We could not do that this year because the State Board of Education reversed the decision of the Secretary of Education, and did so well into our budget building process.

Finally, this process has been 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, social justice initiatives, and facilities and school safety needs.

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. 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.

