

House Ed Testimony on Withdrawal from a School District
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As a superintendent in an SU which has successfully merged into two side by side school districts, I would like to comment on the proposed bill on a town withdrawing from a school district.

Rutland NE began a merger study in the fall of 2015. We were one of the early SUs to explore merging under Act 46. We had eight towns, two of which had high school choice and six of which fed into Otter Valley Union High School. The process of study was intensive, particularly on the central office staff and business office. There were approximately 20 hours of meetings, which required another 20-40 hours of preparation by staff to collect data for the meetings. We had an attorney and a facilitator to support an objective process, and pages upon pages of data collected, collated and provided for the committee to do its work. Once the study committee is ready, there are more meetings and more report requirements with the state board of education approval process and leading to a vote, including the communication and information that needed to be provided. The entire process took approximately six months on a very fast and intensive pace.

The benefits of the merger, however, were felt immediately in the next budget process. We were able to trim over \$1million dollars from the budget, move teachers to where they were needed rather than hire part time teachers in several districts, and ensure equitable offerings for all students across the supervisory union.

I share this as background information for my concern with the proposed bill. The intensity of work that has already taken place can be undone, according to this bill, with the signature of just five voters in a small town the size of Goshen. Should the five voters, which I use to represent 5% of a very small town, ask to withdraw, the study process is initiated all over again even before it is known if the entire town is interested in pursuing this option. The cost of doing this is in tying up the central office staff, especially the superintendent and business manager, and distracting them from the other important work that needs to be done. In addition there is the financial cost of an attorney again advising the work of the committee, the hours needed for a study and ultimately, if approved to move forward, a communication strategy with the town voters and eventually the voters in all towns. All of this is based on the perspective of potentially only 5 voters.

Ramifications of such a withdrawal can also be quite costly, which is not fully known until the previous work is completed. All of this work is done on the basis of a very low number of voters (5%) signing a petition. The disruption to the educational system, the potential erosion of equity and equitable offerings to students, the loss of staff who become quite anxious about their fate especially in the small town, and the divisiveness which can arise has an incredibly low bar to be entered into. Legal costs and costs of the distraction to the day to day business are costs

borne by the entire district and not just the town seeking to withdraw; yet the entire district did not ask for this cost or approve it at this point.

I strongly urge you to reconsider the percentage of voters who are needed to approve the study committee and start the process of withdrawal. Even a school board candidate needs more petition signatures than 5%. For a process as disruptive as this, it seems that it should be well supported prior to beginning, with a much higher percentage of voters required to be invested in moving it forward.

Some recommendations I bring are:

- The threshold of signatures on a petition should be much higher than 5%, perhaps as much as 30% to ensure as many people in the town understand what is being asked as possible and to ensure the petition is not the agenda of just a few
- I recommend the town seeking to withdraw must vote on moving forward with the study committee before that work is commenced.
- The town seeking withdrawal should be responsible for the full costs for the study, such as legal costs, rather than all of the towns not involved in the petition but bound to share the costs across the district. Costs may need to include hiring additional staff to do the analysis if the district staff does not have capacity to do so. Costs may prevent a district from providing programs or services to children during the process as well.