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Testimony February 9, 2022

Re: Drafting request #22-0675. School district mergers and withdrawals

Rep. Kathryn Webb, Chair, House Education Committee

Rep. Lawrence Cupoli, Vice-Chair

Rep. Peter Conlon, Ranking Member

Rep. Kathleen James, Clerk

Representatives Arrison, Austin, Brady, Brown, Hooper, Roof, and Williams

My name is Laurie Cox and I am here as a long time member of Ripton's town government. I am currently Chair of the Selectboard and have been a member of that board for 36 years. I also worked for 34 years as an elementary school counselor. I thank you for the opportunity to bring another perspective to your task

Ripton has worked with the Statute which you are considering re-writing, and I concur there is some of the lack of clarity in the steps of the withdrawal process. I think it important that any revision has the goal of simplicity and clarity. An obscure and convoluted process effectively means that withdrawal from a particular district ceases to be an option. In reality, the points of clarification needed are: 1) add language specifying the time period between a town's vote to withdraw and the subsequent vote by the other district towns; 2) specify who is in charge of the voting in those other towns. 3) specifically state the State Board of Education's responsibility to assign the resulting district to a supervisory union (though I find the present Statute clear as to the Board's duty in making this assignment)

Ripton's path to withdrawal was lengthy. The decision to withdraw was ultimately made because it was a choice of either withdraw or have our school closed. I realize that many people in Vermont have accepted the idea that bigger is better, more efficient, more effective, and more equitable. While it is possible that money might be saved by consolidation, that has yet to be proved here in Vermont and has actually been disproved in other states. Nor has educational improvement been documented. We constantly realize the efficiencies and effectiveness from which we benefit because we are a small state. Maybe smaller is better, and our small communities need to have a true voice in the future of their students, their schools, and their communities, even though their very size means they can always be outvoted.

As legislators, it is important to look at this legislation not only as pertaining to your work on the Education Committee, but to see its impact on the entire fabric of our state, a state made up primarily of very small communities. Their sustainability as well as the strength of our citizenry may well be dependent on small, community-oriented schools at the elementary level. We need legislation that promotes educational quality, but that considers where that quality actually comes from for our youngest students: schools that are easily accessible and welcoming to them and their parents; schools that integrate them into their community and develop their active participation; schools whose communities wrap around them, support and interact with them.