

**Testimony of Paul Forlenza, Lincoln Selectboard,
before the House Education Committee
regarding the Withdrawal Process in H.275**

February 2, 2022

My name is Paul Forlenza and I am the Vice Chair of the Lincoln Selectboard and also the Selectboard liaison to Save Community Schools.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. I would like to talk with you about 3 items related to withdrawing from a unified school district:

- The Lincoln Experience
- Responsibility for well-being of Community
- Supervisory Union challenges in the withdrawal process

The Lincoln Experience

Save Community Schools (SCS) is a group of parents and community members who have invested thousands of hours in preparing Lincoln voters to support withdrawing from the Mount Abraham Unified School District (MAUSD). In August 2021, Lincoln voted 525-172 to withdrawal from MAUSD. This is a 3 to 1 margin and represents 63% of the voters voting in a special election.

The Lincoln Selectboard sponsored three information sessions for the residents of Lincoln prior to the vote. After the Lincoln vote, SCS sponsored two more informational meetings to continue the dialogue with the other towns voting at Town Meeting to ratify Lincolns vote to withdraw.

SCS made the case to the community of the value of community K-6 schools, how to staff the Lincoln school, what a budget would be and the tax impact to Lincoln of withdrawing. MAUSD provided the tax impact analysis for the other four towns of Lincoln withdrawing. These analyses demonstrated that the tax impact to Lincoln and the other district towns would be insignificant.

SCS consulted with several ex-superintendents, had discussions with the MAUSD Superintendent, Business Manager and Board and community members, educators and parents in putting together a plan for establishing a single school district external to

MAUSD. Members of SCS have attended almost all the MAUSD Board meetings over the last 15 months as I have as a Selectboard member.

SCS accomplished many of the requirements of the withdrawal section of H.275. My fear is the current draft does not allow for grassroots community organizing, creativity and originality of solutions. The legislation is very prescriptive about the process. I think a more valuable approach would be for the SBE to define the information they are looking for and let the withdrawing towns figure out how to get there.

Community – the value of community to educating our students and responsibility for the viability of the community in the withdrawal process.

In the discussion about the best way to educate young students, I hear little attention to the value of educating our K-6 students in our own communities and little attention to the value of the local school to the community. The Lincoln Community School is integral to the Lincoln community and adds to the vitality of the town.

“A community school is a **public school** - the hub of its neighborhood, uniting families, educators and community partners to provide all students with top-quality academics, enrichment, health and social services and opportunities to succeed in school and in life”. This is a quote from Institute for Educational Leadership (coalition for community schools).

There is plenty of research to support this notion – I can provide it to you if you like.

Whose responsibility is it to factor in the well-being of the community in deciding to withdraw from a school district or have the district close the community school?

- Neither the SBE nor the Agency of Education has been tasked with that responsibility.
- The mission of the House Education Committee does not identify that responsibility as a primary goal
- The unified school district does not have that as a primary objective

Vermont statute answers that question. 24 V.S.A. § 872 describes the first duty of the Selectboard. The Selectboard “shall have the general supervision of the affairs of the town and shall cause to be performed all duties require of the towns **and town school districts** not committed by law to the care of any particular officer”.

So the Selectboard has that responsibility and unfortunately we don't have the resources to do that as it pertains to the withdrawal process. The biggest challenge seems to be aligning the town with an existing Supervisory Union (SU) or creating a new Supervisory Union.

Supervisory Union

The State Board of Education (SBE) has the responsibility to assign a withdrawing town to a Supervisory Union (SU). Unfortunately, in the case of Ripton, the SBE had few good options because the three surrounding districts (White River Valley, Rutland North East and Addison Central) were not willing to enter into a SU relationship with Ripton.

The SBE assigned Ripton to its own SU even though 16 V.S.A. 261(c): states that a SU needs to be "... large enough to support the planning and administrative functions of a supervisory union." This puts Ripton in a tough spot because it is a very small school district.

If the four other MAUSD towns vote to ratify Lincoln's withdrawal, Lincoln and the SBE are likely to face the same challenges as the Ripton case. This is why Lincoln and Ripton are having exploratory discussions about creating a join SU.

We are working with outside experts to determine if a Lincoln-Ripton SU of 250-300 students is viable. A more viable option would be if another withdrawing town was also interested in joining a Mountain District. My fear is the current draft would make it much more difficult for other towns to succeed in withdrawing if they have not already started the process.

Two Requests to the House Education Committee

First, please acknowledge the hard work that towns, already in the withdrawal process, have done and allow them to continue under the current statute. Not to do so would be unjust and would negate, in Lincoln's case, the will of the voters of the town and the investment we have made in this effort to withdraw.

Second, please consider providing resources to towns working to form their own Supervisory Union. This is an inherently difficult task and funds and technical resources would be valuable.

Thank you.

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