

**Thursday, January 14, 2021**  
**Vermont House Committee on Education**  
**Update on the Status of Schools - School Board Chair Reports**  
**John Stroup, School Board Chair, Addison Northwest School District**

The condition of education in Addison Northwest School District is fragile. Our people are resilient, but we are tired, stressed, and we need your support financially and in planning how to manage the future, both the immediate aftermath of this Covid pandemic and the ongoing concern of declining student enrollment.

If I've learned one thing during this last year, it's that a functioning economy is dependent upon offering in-school education for students. Funding education by supporting our teachers and staff is vital to our entire economic system, in the present and in the future. In short, education is essential if we want our people to be able to work.

To that end, I ask that you do whatever you can to prioritize vaccinations to our teachers and staff so that the essential work of schools can proceed in as safe a fashion as possible. We need our people in schools, and we need them to be safe.

In the ANWSD, we have a strong set of administrators who work hard for the best interests of the students. Our teachers and staff have adjusted so many times that I'm sure they've lost count and persisted to deliver education to our students over the last year as we have all struggled with the consequences of Covid. Our families struggle to support the education of their children. It's fair to say that every parent or guardian is a teacher, but they are not all professional educators, and that's what we've asked many of them to become. The inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic have only been exacerbated. Please consider how to redouble your support for working families and the children who now must learn by themselves as well as families who live at or near poverty struggling to maintain their connections to learning. This requires investment in not just schools, but child care, early education, and afterschool care.

Some concrete ways you might do that: focus on expanding access to broadband networks and support resources for technology in schools. Rural school districts like ours really need this support, but we also need to help our families who will struggle to afford the kind of broadband capacity required for remote learning. It's unlikely that we will ever move away from 1:1 computer needs. We need resources to support the diffusion of technology and support to maintain their increased use as the technology faces greater wear and tear. Simply put, too many of the families in my district live without good enough internet access. They need it now.

A second concrete way to support families: advocate for and support universal free meals for all children. This cannot be an unfunded mandate. One of the greatest success stories from 2020 was the pivot made by school districts to ensure that every family and every child was fed. With increased economic hardship, we know that even more of our families face food shortages. The CARES Act money will not last forever so please consider plans now to support universal free meals for all students. And if you're looking

for more heroes and heroines to celebrate, please keep in mind all those people who in a time of total fear, made lunches, packed them, and delivered them to every child who needed it. Those people went above and beyond to ensure our children were fed.

Our Board faces significant challenges in our attempt to maintain quality educational programs and opportunities. Some of our challenges are exacerbated by COVID, but most precede them. Our enrollment has declined significantly over the past decade. We know it will level off in the coming years, but we are not sure we can make it as a district to get to that stability. Given the unsustainable rise in costs of healthcare and the requirements of the Education Quality Standards, the things we will likely have to cut are some of the parts of school that make it great. Think about this: we may only be able to offer one language for high school students. We may face the unenviable choice to cut our band or chorus or another athletic program. Act 77 requires us to provide flexible pathways for all students. Our schools are working hard to meet that goal. Unsustainable rising costs puts those pathways in jeopardy. We might have to choose between one AP course or another and field trips for students. That's where we are. Down to the barebones and struggling to keep what we have.

Our teachers work hard to offer great education but the curriculum and the offerings are austere. We are a district that is lower middle class - we have a substantial number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. We are also small and shrinking: staying within the budget parameters that the state sets while also maintaining those programs is becoming effectively impossible. The challenges that we face with declining enrollment will become overwhelming with the changes to Act 173, the weighting study, which are likely to impact our revenues during FY23. Please hear me: The weighting study in its current form will diminish our revenues deeply so as to likely make high school education in Vergennes financially impossible. Maybe that's what you want, but if that's the case then please think carefully about what high school education will look like in Addison County especially in its northern half.

There are a number of factors beyond our control. Most important are health care costs. These comprise an increasing and increasingly unsustainable part of the budget. They drive up our overall costs by 2-3%. To balance healthcare costs this year, we made an across the board cut to educational services. That means fewer field trips, fewer supplies, fewer programs dedicated to addressing our most pressing issues like racism and prejudice. Please take up and consider Act 63 as one step in the direction of helping districts deal with the costs of healthcare.

In addition, I believe that while districts should not be forced to go through another round of mergers, the system for pursuing such mergers is also not clear to either the community or board members. Merging with other districts may be an avenue to secure educational programs for kids. For districts who might seriously consider that avenue like ours, how will you support them and what are the pathways for doing so. The costs can and should be borne statewide as well so that there might also be statewide and regional benefits.

With all the funding pressures and rising costs, we have our backs up against the wall. I ask you to please consider the impact of the weighting study on our district and prioritize managing the rise of healthcare costs.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about the state of education in the Addison Northwest School District. What we have learned during this pandemic is just how resilient and excellent our teachers, staff and administration are in adjusting and delivering remote and in-person learning to our students. They have risen to this extraordinary challenge. While it continues to take a toll on everyone involved, it is a testament to what we can accomplish in adverse conditions. But the pandemic has also laid bare the daily inequities that many of our students face and this is an area that needs to be further identified so we can create viable pathways and solutions for all of our students.

So, in conclusion please prioritize vaccinations for educators, work on equitable broadband coverage statewide, look into funding universal free school meals, and carefully consider the impact of both the weighing study and increasing cost of healthcare.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,  
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