



GREATER RUTLAND COUNTY SUPERVISORY UNION

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October 2, 2024

Secretary Saunders -

We greatly appreciate the legislature's work laying the foundations for systems that leverage economies of scale and increase coordination among regional education systems. In our region, the Southwest chapter of the Vermont Superintendents' Association (SWVSA), we have been discussing for several years the need for further consolidation and coordination among our member organizations (Slate Valley, Rutland Northeast, Rutland City, Greater Rutland County, Bennington-Rutland, and Mill River). If we were told tomorrow to consolidate and given the parameters, we'd all be excited to get to work.

However, the urgency of the situation cannot be overstated. We are currently facing a lack of clear vision or direction for what BOCES means for Vermont. Our local efforts, while commendable, are not aligning with a cohesive vision for education in the state or even the region. The promise of BOCES now relies mainly on local work, and we are in dire need of support in that work, especially where we struggle with the challenges of overcoming local control. We've all seen the local/regional divides created or exacerbated by conversations around consolidating/closing schools. What a shame if BOCES, done well across the state, could keep smaller schools viable, but we miss that opportunity. However, we firmly believe that a well-implemented BOCES model could bring about significant positive changes, such as keeping smaller schools viable and fostering a more cohesive vision for education in the state.

When we think about states that use a BOCES-style model, we see organization and direction at the state level to ensure that coordination is built into the system and that economies of scale are guaranteed, not up to the choice of a local board. We are concerned that we are reinventing the wheel at the local level. We respectfully request that the Agency of Education look at models working across the country and plan to implement a consistent BOCES model across the state. We believe that almost any model would still allow important regional and local differences that we can account for in our regional and local work.

We are also concerned that we will likely be lobbying our local boards for two challenging things: additional funding (to initially start a BOCES) and a loss of local control. We understand that the law requires boards to vote to opt in or opt out -- but we are concerned that those decisions will be made not based on what is best for students but based on what boards and residents might hold more dear -- local control. It would be a shame if BOCES were not implemented consistently, as specific boards opt out. Respectfully, we request that the legislature update the BOCES bill to reflect regions logically laid out from the state level, without a provision to opt out or to give the Agency of Education the authority to do so.

If those are two requests that cannot be honored, at the bare minimum, a state-level conversation to work on a BOCES model together would seem prudent and supportive of regions trying to tackle this work on their own. We believe that initiating a state-level dialogue is a prudent measure and an urgent necessity to ensure alignment in our collective efforts to enhance the education system.

Respectfully,

Bill Olsen (Superintendent, Rutland City Public School District)
Brian Hill (Superintendent - Mill River Unified Union School District)
Brooke Olsen-Farrell (Superintendent - Slate Valley Unified Union School District)
Chris Sell (Superintendent - Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union)
James Culkeen (Superintendent - Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union)
Randi Lowe (Superintendent - Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union)
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