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Shaping Our Future Together

Submitted to: VT House Education Committee
From: Patrick J. Reen, Superintendent, Mount Abraham Unified School District
Subject: Testimony on Instructional Scale
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Background/Historical Context

I am in my ninth year as superintendent for the Mt. Abraham Unified School District. We are a PreK -12 district in northeastern Addison County with a little less than 1,200 students in four towns, Bristol, Monkton, New Haven, and Starksboro. Each town has an elementary school ranging in size from about 80 to about 250 students. All of our elementary schools feed into our middle/high school, Mt. Abraham, with a 7-12 enrollment of about 575. Lincoln was once a member town in our school district. Though no longer a member town, most of Lincoln's grade 7-12 students still attend Mt. Abraham as tuition students.

In my nine years at MAUSD we have merged into a unified district under Act 46, reduced year-over-year spending (a very challenging feat to achieve) twice, navigated a global pandemic, unsuccessfully explored school consolidation, unsuccessfully explored merging with Addison Northwest School District, failed two bond attempts to repair our middle/high school (a third failed attempt occurred the year before I arrived), had one member town withdraw from our unified district, had a second member town very nearly withdraw, and have experienced a weighted pupil decline almost every year. In short, for several years now we've been deeply engaged in the tremendously difficult work of trying to achieve scale to give our students the best education we can at a cost our taxpayers can afford. Our efforts have resulted only in decreasing scale. We have not consolidated schools. We have not merged districts. In fact, the number of districts in Addison County has grown from three to four with Lincoln's withdrawal, and was very nearly six districts if not for Ripton choosing to return to ACSD and Starksboro's efforts to withdraw being stopped by another MAUSD town voting against it.

In the fall of 2019 myself and my two other Addison County superintendent colleagues approached the then Secretary of Education asking for support to explore the possibility of merging our three small school districts into a single Addison County district. It was clear to us then that working to increase scale, including scale at the central office level, was an important step to take in pursuit of equity, opportunity and affordability. We advocated for this change knowing it would mean two out of our three positions would be eliminated and nearly two-thirds of our central office colleagues would also lose their jobs. The response we received was that

after Act 46 there was no appetite to engage in this kind of work. Since then MAUSD has explored closing/repurposing schools and merging with ANWSD. Local leaders, primarily superintendents and school boards, were left to bear the brunt of this work. Despite our efforts and years of community engagement we have not closed or repurposed any of our schools and we have not merged with another district. In fact, as I stated earlier, the number of school districts in Addison County has grown from three to four and was very nearly six.

Merger Study - ANWSD & MAUSD

Despite hearing there would be no support to pursue a single Addison County district, the superintendents and school boards for MAUSD and ANWSD agreed it would be worthwhile to explore a merger of our two school districts to create scale that would provide greater equity and opportunity for students in a more cost-effective way for taxpayers. This decision came after my colleague, Superintendent Soule from Addison Northwest, and I worked with our teams to model the potential savings and programmatic benefits of a merger. In our efforts we estimated that savings at that time from central office consolidation would be approximately \$1.3 million per year. Additionally, if we were to merge middle and high schools we estimated we could save an additional \$2.45 million annually while increasing the programs we offer students, such as design technology, world languages and alternative programs. That's a total savings of approximately \$3.75 million annually while increasing program opportunities for students. Compare this to an alternative future where we generate no efficiencies from scale and our programming decreases while costs increase. In MAUSD we estimated an additional savings of nearly \$3.5 million annually if we had closed three of our five elementary schools, which we could do and still have space in the other schools without any additions. These efforts would increase opportunity and equity while decreasing the cost burden to taxpayers. Elementary school consolidation never made it to the ballot in MAUSD but the merger study process would move forward.

Following the 706b merger study process, the school boards voted in April of 2021 to form a merger study committee with proportional representation from the two school districts. The committee met regularly for eleven months, between the spring of 2021 to the fall of 2022. With the help of a consultant who has decades of educational leadership experience in Vermont, the committee studied the benefits and disadvantages of merging the two districts. I think it is fair to say there was a healthy mix of committee members who were very skeptical about the merger and those who thought it had great potential. After eleven months of careful analysis the committee determined the benefits of merging the two school districts outweighed the disadvantages. In short, the committee felt a merger was the best way to ensure we could continue to provide students, especially at the secondary level, the kinds of programming and opportunities they deserve at a cost taxpayers could afford. You can see the full list of advantages and disadvantages on pages 4-8 of the Merger Study Committee Report linked in the email along with this written testimony.

Following the proper channels, the question of whether or not to merge the two districts was warned for a vote to take place in November of 2022. Leading up to the vote, the committee spent months engaging the community to inform them about the advantages and disadvantages

of the merger. Many were concerned about governance moving even further away, a concern raised during Act 46 mergers. Others expressed concern over the loss of identity, being Vergennes Commodore blue or Mt. Abe Eagle maroon in their heart. In the end, both communities soundly rejected the proposed merger by more than 2:1 margins. In MAUSD 1,115 yes to 2,281 no. In ANWSD 771 yes to 2001 no. The merger would not happen. There has been no official discussion of another merger study taking place.

Since November 2022, both MAUSD and ANWSD have struggled to sustain programming and support for students, especially at the secondary level. The unexpected influx of ESSER funds masked the financial challenges for a period of time while we were also distracted by the challenges of managing a global pandemic. In MAUSD we have continued to see a decline in weighted pupils and have cut millions of dollars from our budget to address the financial pressure expressed by our voters. For now we have been able to achieve these savings almost entirely through attrition. We have reduced several elementary and secondary classroom teaching positions, several instructional coach and coordinator positions, social emotional interventionist positions and a series of other professional and support staff positions. We are phasing out world language in our middle school but have been able to sustain high school programs for the time being, though several courses now run every other semester or every other year. Each of the reductions made to positions outside of the classroom reduce support to classroom teachers and administrators while responsibilities continue to grow from increased student need and a steady stream of new legislation passed each year. It took three votes to pass our FY25 budget and only passed on the third attempt after making many reductions. Our FY26 total expense is less than our FY25 while our cost per pupil continues to increase.

This is just one story of efforts around Vermont to address the pressures felt by schools and communities. The challenges are real, the fears are legitimate, and the opportunity exists to do better for our students and taxpayers. But we can't do it while keeping everything the same. In fact, the only thing that seems clear is that keeping everything the same is not an option. We need your support and leadership to pursue the opportunity to do better for our students and our taxpayers.

Respectfully,

Patrick J. Reen
Superintendent
Mount Abraham Unified School District