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City of Newport
222 Main Street
Newport, Vermont 05855
www.newportvermont.org

Newport City Council Meeting
Regular Meeting Agenda
Monday, January 15, 2018, beginning at 6:30 p.m.
Council Room

City Council: Paul Monette, Mayor
John Wilson, President
Denis Chenette
James Merriam
Julie Raboin

Laura Dolgin, City Manager
James D. Johnson, City Clerk/Treasurer

1. Call the Regular Council Meeting to Order
2. Approve Minutes of the January 8, 2018 Regular Meeting
3. Comments by Members of the Public
Public Comments will be generally limited to no more than two (2) minutes per person. All participants must sign in and clearly state their name and the topic of the comment. No action will be taken on items raised until a subsequent meeting (if warranted).
4. February 3, 2018 Winter Festival Invite, Parks & Rec Director Jess Booth
5. Overview of Act 46 Alternative Governance Structure & Preliminary Budget Information, Elaine Collins, Principal Newport City Elementary
6. New Business
7. Old Business
8. Set next meeting: Second Community Visit, January 17 @ 6:30-9:00; Regularly Scheduled Council Meeting, February 5, 2018; Centennial Planning Committee: January 23, 2018, at 5:00 - 7:00.
9. Executive Session for Real Estate.
10. Adjourn

Non-confidential materials pertaining to this agenda are available for inspection at the City Clerk's office commencing at 8:00 a.m., the morning of the meeting.

Newport City Council Meeting Participation Guidelines

Newport City Council meetings are for the purpose of allowing Council members to conduct City business. Distinct from public hearings or town meetings, City Council meetings are held in public, but are not meetings of the public. City Council meetings are the only time the City Council members have to discuss, deliberate and decide upon City matters. In an effort to conduct orderly and efficient meetings, the Mayor kindly requests your cooperation and compliance with the following guidelines per the policy adopted on December 21, 2015 and ratified on January 23, 2017:

1. Please be respectful of each other, Council members, city staff, and the public.
2. Please raise your hand to be recognized by the Mayor. Once recognized, please state your name and address or affiliation.
3. Please address only the Mayor and not members of the public, staff, or presenters.
4. Please abide by any time limits. Time limits will be used to insure everyone is heard and that there is sufficient time for the Council to complete their agenda within a reasonable timeframe.
5. The Mayor will make a reasonable effort to allow everyone to speak once before speakers address the Council a second time per the limits adopted on January 23, 2017.
6. Once public comment has been heard, discussion will be limited to the City Council members.
7. Please do not interrupt or mock other speakers or otherwise exhibit disruptive behavior during the City Council meeting.
8. Please do not repeat the points made by others, except to indicate agreement or disagreement with other views.
9. Please use the hallway for side conversation. It is difficult to hear speaker remarks when side conversations are occurring in the Council Chamber.
10. Presentations to the Council are not open to public comment. However, per the policy adopted on December 21, 2015, matters on the agenda requiring a vote are open to public comment immediately prior to the Council vote.
11. Individuals who do not abide by these procedures will be asked to leave the Council Chamber.

Council Minutes

January 8, 2018

DRAFT

A duly warned meeting of the Newport City Council was held on Monday, January 8, 2018 in the council room in the Newport Municipal Building. Present were Mayor Paul Monette, Council President John Wilson, Council members Julie Raboin, Denis Chenette and James Merriam, City Manager Laura Dolgin, City Clerk/Treasurer James Johnson, Charles Elliott, members of the Press and public.

Mayor Monette called the meeting to order at 6:32 PM

Approval of Minutes

Mr. Wilson moved to approve the minutes of December 18, 2017. Seconded by Mr. Chenette, motion carried unanimously.

Comments by the Public

None

Municipal Plan

Ms. Raboin moved to approve the amendment to the Municipal plan. Seconded by Mr. Wilson, motion carried unanimously.

New Business

Mr. Wilson commended the Dept. of Public works for the good job they did on the roads last week.

Mr. Merriam commended everyone who helped on the trails at Bluff Side Farms. It is a great place to get out right in the middle of the City.

Old Business

Mayor Monette reminded everyone of the Community Meeting on Wednesday, January 17, 2018 in the Municipal GYM at 6:30 PM.

Mr. Merriam noted the start of the University Promise for child care at the United Church.

DRAFT

Ms. Dolgin stated that the City is moving forward with the vote on the proposed Eastside Water tower on Town Meeting Day, March 6, 2018. There will be two Public Hearings between now and Town Meeting, February 5 and February 26.

Ms. Raboin asked when the meeting for the Downtown Designation would be? Ms. Dolgin stated it would be in late February.

Next Meeting Dates

Council Meeting January 15th, Centennial Meeting January 9th

Executive Session, Contracts

Mr. Merriam moved to find that premature public knowledge of a pending contract will clearly place the City of Newport at a substantial disadvantage and that we enter executive session to discuss a contract under the provision of 1 VSA 313 (a)(1) of the Vermont Statutes. Seconded by Mr. Chenette, motion carried unanimously.

No action.

Adjourn

Mr. Chenette moved to adjourn at 19:20 Hrs. (7:20 PM). Seconded by Mr. Wilson, motion carried unanimously.

Attested _____ This _____ Day of January 2018

Mayor

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the City Council again this year.

Talking Points:

*State-level trends:

This is an especially difficult budgeting season at NCES because of the budgeting short-fall at the state level. We are trying to keep our spending increases at or below 2%. Essentially this means that we are level funding our budget, since salaries and benefits are projected to go up 3%. Even though our number of students are up, which is good in many ways, the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) is down significantly from 104% to 98%. This will have a tremendous negative impact on the tax rate. The projection, if the 98% is correct, is that taxes will experience nearly a 10 cent increase without any increase in local spending. On a \$100,000 home, this means \$100 more in taxes.

We don't have a final budget amount but will have one ready within the next week. We will be inviting City Council members to come to an informational budget meeting at the school during our second February meeting on February 26th at 6 pm.

Volume 1

3450.1 A proposal under Act 46, Sec. 9 shall demonstrate the district's or districts' due diligence and provide sufficient, thoughtful data and documentation in support of the proposal.

- ❖ The Community-School at a Crossroads:
Understanding School-Communities in Relationship to Alternative Governance Structures
- ❖ NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative

3450.2 A proposal under Act 46, Sec. 9 shall include a comparison of options considered, including consideration of a Preferred Structure.

- NCSU Act 46 Timeline and Process
- Act 46 Board Minutes
 - Brighton
 - Charleston
 - Coventry
 - Derby
 - Holland
 - Jay/Westfield
 - Lowell
 - Morgan
 - Newport City
 - Newport Town
 - Troy
 - Westfield
 - NCSU Executive Committee and Full Board
 - North Country Union High School
 - North Country Union Junior High School
- NCSU Act 46 Publicity
 - Newspaper
 - NCSU Facebook Page
 - NCSU Web Site
 - NCSU Act 46 Brochure

- NCSU Community Conversations (Meeting in a Box)
 - Trainings
 - Meetings Held
 - Advertising, Warnings, etc.
 - Guidelines
 - Meeting in a Box Components
 - Compiled Results from All Meetings
 - M.i.a.B Board Minutes
- NCSU Act 46 Survey
 - Letter to the Editor
 - Survey and Results
 - Publicity

Volume 2

3450.3 A proposal under Act 46, Sec. 9 should demonstrate on what basis the State Board would be able to "conclude that this alternative structure... is the best means of meeting the Goals in a particular region" as the Board is required to do pursuant to Sec. 8(b).

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

3450.4 A decision not to explore or propose options other than an Alternative Structure under Act 46, Sec. 9 cannot be justified solely because a district's small size means that data is not publicly available.

❖ Not applicable to this proposal

3450.5 Current, baseline information for the Remaining District(s) making the proposal (for the current fiscal year, for the most recent 3-5 years, and trends) including:

(1) Operating/tuitioning structure

- Bylaws of the North Country Supervisory Union
- NCSU School Board Community

(2) ADM by Grade and

- Enrollment Analysis (FY2013-FY2018)
- ADM Trends by District
- Enrollment Summary: September 2017

(3) Enrollment by grade in each school operated by the district

(4) Equalized pupils

(5) "Phantom Pupils"

(6) Students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch ("FRL")

(7) Students receiving or eligible for special education services ("SpEd")

(8) Students receiving or eligible for section 504 accommodations ("504")

(9) Students for whom English is not the primary language ("ELL")

(10) For each grade operated by the district, current and 5-year historic enrollment of students in any school operated by another district, including:

(A) Students enrolled in a school operated by another district pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 822a (statewide public high school choice), including:

- (i) the schools in which they are enrolled
- (ii) demographics

(B) Students for whom the district pays tuition pursuant to:

- (i) 16 V.S.A. § 821(c) (elementary student; geographic considerations)
 - Does not apply
- (ii) 16 V.S.A. § 822(c)(1)(B) (secondary student; unique educational needs; independent school)
 - Senior High School
 - Junior High School

(11) For each grade not operated by the district making the proposal, current and 5-year historic data regarding schools to which the district pays tuition, including:

(A) The grades for which tuition is paid

(B) The school(s) to which tuition is paid

(C) For each identified school to which tuition is paid:

(i) The number of the district's students who are enrolled, by grade

(ii) Demographics (FRL; ELL; SpEd; 504) of the district's students in the school, by grade

(12) For each grade not operated by the district, current and 5-year historic data regarding schools to which the district designates pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 827, including the information outlined in Paragraph (11) above.

(13) Statistical data regarding the community:

- Summary of county characteristics (Orleans and Essex counties)
- Economic – Demographic comparison
 - VT counties
 - Essex County towns
 - Orleans County towns
- Income/tax revenues
- Home values/home sales
- Commuting patterns
- Income sensitivity

3450.6 If there is more than one district making the proposal:

(1) Current and historic relationship between or among the districts.

❖ Please see NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative

(2) Distances and quality of roads between the districts and between schools, if any.

- Maps of NCSU
 - AOE Merger Activity Map
 - AOE Merger Activity Map: close-up of NCSU
 - Topography of NCSU
 - Highway map of NCSU
 - Map of Distances between NCSU schools
 - NCSU Mileage Chart
- NCSU Mileage Summary: Road class by town

- Maps: General Highway Maps by Town

- Brighton
- Charleston
- Coventry
- Derby
- Ferdinand
- Holland
- Jay
- Lowell
- Morgan
- Newport City
- Newport Town
- Troy
- Westfield

(A) Transportation concerns, especially those related to current low equity of opportunities and/or concern about future diminishment of equity.

- NCSU Transportation Compliance Plan

- School Board Minutes concerning Transportation Compliance Plan

3450.7 If there is more than one district making the proposal, conversations among them on and after July 1, 2015 regarding improving the ability to meet or exceed each of the Goals throughout the Region and exploring ways to work together, including:

- NCSU District to District Conversations
- NCSU Full Board and Executive Committee Collaborative Conversations
- NCSU/OCSU Legislative Education Forum
- Public Agenda Workshop “Sustaining Public Engagement in Vermont”

Volume 3

3450.8 Evidence of the current ability of each district making the proposal to independently meet or exceed the Goals concerning educational quality, opportunity, and equity as required in Act 46, Sec. 9 and Sec. 2.

- NCSU EQS Introduction
- VT AOE NCSU Integrated Field Review
 - Student-led Conferences
- NCSU School Nursing Services
- School Board Minutes concerning EQS

(1) Student assessments, by grade-level, for all students in the district and for students disaggregated by demographics (including FRL; ELL; SpEd; and 504) -- current and 5-year (or 2- to 3-year for SBAC) historic data including:

- NCSU Student Assessments Introduction
 - NCSU Instructional Framework
 - NCSU Framework for a Positive Learning Environment
 - NCSU K-8 Assessment Calendar

(A) ELA/reading in 3rd - 9th grade

(B) Mathematics in 3rd - 9th grade

(C) Science in three grades (NECAP)

(D) Any local assessments used

(2) If elementary schools are operated, then for at least the previous 3 years:

(A) Subjects offered: please see (B)

(B) Number of hours per week for each category for each grade (e.g., math, science, foreign languages, art, music, physical education, etc.)

- NCSU Learning Opportunities
 - 2017-2018 NCSU Learning Opportunities
 - 2016-2017 NCSU Learning Opportunities
 - 2015-2016 NCSU Learning Opportunities

(3) If secondary schools are operated, then for at least the previous 3 years:

(A) Subjects offered: please see (B)

(B) Breadth and depth of offerings (e.g., levels of math instruction; foreign languages; fine arts; AP courses; etc.).

- North Country Union High School
 - NCUHS Program of Studies 2017-18
 - NCUHS Program of Studies 2016-17
 - NCUHS Program of Studies 2015-16

- North Country Career Center
 - NCCC Program of Studies 2017-18
 - NCCC Program of Studies 2016-17
 - NCCC Program of Studies 2015-16

(4) For each grade for which tuition is paid, evidence of each student's access to options, including whether the sending district or the receiving school provides transportation as needed, particularly for students living in poverty and students with disabilities - including the cost of providing transportation.

(5) For a school operated by the district, students accessing non-traditional learning experiences, currently and in the most recent 3 years, including:

(A) Completion by 12th grade students in the district of at least one non-traditional learning experience;

(B) Types of non-traditional learning experiences available;

(C) Access to support services, including extended learning opportunities for students who need them (e.g., after-school and summer programs):

- Work-based learning
- Dual enrollment
- Online/blended learning
- Northeast Kingdom Learning Center
- NCUHS Credit Recovery Program
- Alternative Program Enrollment
- Arts and Communication Academy
- Stem Academy
- Encore After School and Summer Programs

(6) Evidence of career and college preparation and readiness, currently and in the most recent 3 years, including:

(A) Participation by 11th and 12th grade students in Career Technical Education programs ("CTE") (regardless of whether an operating or tuitioning district)

(B) Work-based learning accessed by CTE students (regardless of whether an operating or tuitioning district)

(C) Dual enrollment participation (an operating district and, if known, a tuitioning district)

(D) Early college participation (regardless of whether an operating or tuitioning district)

(7) Secondary school completion, for all students in the district and disaggregated by demographics (including FRL; ELL; SpEd; and 504) and linked to the elementary school of residence (e.g., school in which the student was enrolled immediately prior to secondary school or school in which enrolled for majority of elementary grades).

(8) Current and historic data on teacher turnover for the most recent 3 years.

(9) Current and historic data on administrator turnover.

- Tenure of NCSU Principals and Administrators

(10) Professional development opportunities available.

- Professional Development Calendars and Schedules
 - Elementary schools and NCUHS/NCCC/NCUJHS school-year calendars
 - Administrators' Meetings
 - Special Education PD Sessions
 - Teacher Meetings 2017-2018
 - NCSU Thursday Afternoon Meetings
 - Summer Learning Opportunities
- Professional Development Opportunities
 - Convocation and Supervisory Union-wide PD Days
 - Leadership Team Meetings
 - Local PD Agenda Examples
 - Learning Walks
 - Instructional Coaching
 - Neuro-team School-based PD Opportunities
 - New Teacher Orientation
 - Mentor Support
 - Nurses

Volume 4

3450.9 Evidence of the current ability of each district making the proposal to independently meet or exceed the Goals concerning efficiency and fiscal accountability as required in Act 46, Sec. 9 and Sec. 2:

- North Country Supervisory Union Annual Reports

- NCSU Annual Report 2017
- NCSU Annual Report 2016
- NVSU Annual Report 2015

(1) Shared programmatic and other nonfinancial resources with other districts in the Region.

- NCSU Organization Chart 2017-2018
- NCSU Special Education Department
 - Cog Illustration
 - NCSU Continuum of Instruction
 - NCSU Continuum of Instruction Descriptors
 - EST Definition 2017
 - EST Flow Chart
 - EST Student Academic Example
 - EST Behavioral Scenario 2017
 - NCSU Common Board Policy G.7 Educational Support System
 - NCSU Behavior Team
 - “Weekly Special”
- NCSU School Nurse Leader
 - Job Description
 - Reports to the Superintendent
 - Tooth Tutor/Mobile Dental Van
- FY17 NCSU Shared Teachers

(2) Flexible management arrangements with other districts in the Region.

(3) Economies of scale and efficiencies with other districts in the Region - e.g.: shared human services; common payroll system; joint contract for custodial services; etc.

- NCSU Centralized Facilities Management
- NCSU Centralized Business/Finance Management
 - Calendar of Annual Business/Finance Shared Operations
 - Centralized Bid Schedule
- Consolidation of Information Technology Services in NCSU
 - NCSU Programs and Database Relationships
 - NCSU Network Block diagram

(4) Ratios (for each grade in each school operated by each district making the proposal; both at the district-level and at the supervisory union-level):

(A) Student-to-teacher - where "teacher" is defined as any person licensed to be employable as a teacher who is employed as a teacher and is providing direct instruction to students in one or more elementary or secondary grades.

- Student-to-Direct Instruction Teacher
- Student to All Teachers

(B) Student-to-administrator - where "administrator" is defined as any person employed as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, assistant principal, special education director, essential early education director, or Title I coordinator.

- Student-to-Administrator

(C) Student-to-adult - where "adult" is defined as all paid personnel employed by a school district or supervisory union.

- Student to All Staff

(5) Total education spending, currently and most recent 3-5 years.

(6) Education spending per equalized pupils, currently and most recent 3-5 years.

(7) Education spending per equalized pupils - excluding "phantom pupils," currently and most recent 3-5 years.

(8) Small school grants received, currently and most recent 3-5 years.

(9) Education spending per equalized pupils - excluding small school grants received, currently and most recent 3-5 years.

(10) For a district that operates grades and pays tuition for others, the increase in education spending per equalized pupil for operation and for tuition-payment.

(11) Trends in special education costs in the district and on an SU-wide basis and any efficiencies achieved in SU/Regional approach.

3450.10 Description of Region, including:

(1) Identity of each district that the district making the proposal considers to be in its Region that is NOT part of the proposal ("NPD").

- The Northeast Kingdom
- Regional Maps
 - VT AOE Merger Activity Map
 - Highway Map of NCSU Towns
 - AOE Map of NCSU

(2) Regional relationships and transportation between the district(s) making the proposal and the identified NPD(s):

(A) Current and historic relationship among the districts

- Summary of County Characteristics
- Economic – Demographic Comparison of Vermont Counties
- Tax Revenues for Vermont Counties
- Home Sales for Vermont Counties

(B) Distances and quality of roads between the districts and between schools, if any.

- Orleans County Commuting Patterns
- VT AOT Road Map
- Expanded Road Map of NCSU
- Topographic Map of Vermont

(i) Transportation concerns, especially those related to current low equity of opportunities and/or concern about future diminishment of equity.

- Distances Between NCSU Schools
- NCSU Transportation Study
- VT AOE Transportation Waiver and NCSU Transportation Compliance Plan

(3) Conversations between the district(s) making the proposal and the identified NPD(s).

- NCSU/OCSU Legislative Education Forum
 - Invitation
 - Announcement
 - Warning
 - Questions for Consideration
 - Minutes of NCSU/OCSU Legislative Education Forum
 - NCSU and Local District Minutes concerning Legislative Education Forum
- OCSU/OSWSU/NCSU Superintendents' Meeting

(4) For each NPD identified, the barriers to including the NPD in the proposal.

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

(5) If one or more of the identified NPDs have the same operating / tuitioning structure as one or more districts making the proposal:

(A) The barriers to merging the like districts

(B) The empirical evidence that would enable the State Board to reach a conclusion that remaining as separate districts is the "best means of meeting" each of the Goals in the Region as it is required to do by Act 46, Sec. 8(b).

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

3450.11 Supervisory union with "smallest number of member districts practicable".

(1) If two or more districts making the proposal share the same operating / tuitioning structure for some or all grades, then explain why the districts remain as separate districts under the proposal, including:

(A) The barriers to merger

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

(B) The empirical evidence that would enable the State Board to reach a conclusion that remaining as separate districts is the "best means of meeting" each of the Goals in the Region as it is required to do by Act 46, Sec. 8(b)

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

3450.12 Geographic isolation of a district from district(s) with the same operating / tuitioning structure, including the potential isolation of a district with low fiscal capacity or with a high percentage of students from economically-deprived backgrounds.

(1) Isolation or potential isolation of a district making the proposal

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

(2) Isolation or potential isolation of a district in the Region that is not included in the proposal

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

3450.13 Ways in which the district(s) making the proposal will work with each other and/or with other districts in the Region to promote improvement in the district and throughout the Region in connection with each of the Goals as envisioned by Act 46, Sec. 9(a)(2) including:

(1) To the extent that the data provided in this Rule 3450 reveals inequities and/or disparities among districts or among demographic subgroups, the ways in which the district(s) making the proposal will work to improve the inequities and/or disparities.

- NCSU Full Board Fall Forum "Understanding Poverty in Education"
 - Resolution on Poverty Cover Letter
 - Resolution: *Commitment to Equity and Addressing Issues of Poverty in Vermont Schools*
 - NCSU Full Board Meeting Minutes
 - "Understanding Poverty" Break-Out Groups Notes
 - Newspaper Coverage
- Rural Collaborative
 - What is a Rural Education Collaborative?
 - VT Rural Education Collaborative Grants
 - Superintendent's Report
 - NCSU Executive Committee Minutes
 - National Forum to Advance Rural Education
 - Conference: Public Education that Works for All Children

(2) Ways in which the district(s) making the proposal and other districts in the Region demonstrate that they consider themselves to be collectively responsible for the education of all prekindergarten through grade 12 students residing in the supervisory union

- NCSU Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community (WSCC) Grants
 - Facts are Key to Changing the Outcomes
 - Goals of the Substances Abuse Services Grant
 - Minutes of October 24, 2016 WSCC Meeting
 - Minutes of November 16, 2016 WSCC Meeting
 - 2017-2018 WSCC Meeting Schedule
 - WSCC Film Presentation of "Written Off"
 - WSCC 2017 Parent/Caregiver Program Letter
 - Parent/Caregiver Program Announcement
- Reporting System Re-design
- Personalized/Proficiency Based Learning and Great Schools Partnership
 - Implementation Timeline
 - Community Engagement Timeline
 - NCSU Sign Posts
 - Personalized Learning in a Standards Based System
 - A Quick Guide to "PBL"
 - Proficiency Work At NCUHS
 - Studying VT-Made Models of Student-Centered, Proficiency-Based Learning in Action
 - UVEI/NCSU Project Based Learning Design & Implementation Courses
 - SU and District Minutes concerning PBL and GSP
- Superintendent/Central Office Monthly Reports

(3) Ways in which the supervisory union operates in a manner that maximizes efficiencies through economies of scale and the flexible management, transfer, and sharing of nonfinancial resources among the member districts.

❖ Please see 3450.9 (1)(2)(3)

3450.14 Evidence that the district(s) making the proposal is/are striving for increased scale.

❖ Please see *NCSU Act 46 Self-Study Narrative*

3450.15 Evidence that the proposal ensures transparency and accountability.

(1) For the district(s) making the proposal and for any other member districts of the supervisory union

- Fall Forums

(2) For the public at large

- Community Engagement

3450.16 Actions the district(s) making the proposal will take in order to continue to improve performance in connection with each of the Goals as required by Act 46, Sec. 9(a)(3)(C).

- North Country Supervisory Union Commitments
- North Country Supervisory Union Design for Learning

3450.17 If the proposal includes a request for supervisory union assignment or reassignment, in what ways will the assignment or reassignment afford increased efficiency or greater convenience and economy and facilitate prekindergarten through grade 12 curriculum planning and coordination?

❖ Not applicable to this proposal

3450.18 Any other data or analysis that the district(s) wishes to include.

- National Education Policy Center:

"Consolidation of Schools and Districts, What the Research Says and What It Means"

- NCSU Act 46 House Education Committee Testimony
- Education Week, *"Our Schools Have an Equity Problem. What Should We Do About It?"*
- Voices for Vermont's Children, Education Matters, *"The Impacts of Systemic Inequity in Vermont"*
- NCSU T-Shirt Tuesday for Texas
- NCSU Flannel Friday for Food
- North Country Supervisory Union Web Site Links

The Community-School at a Crossroads:

Understanding school-communities in relationship to alternative governance structures

Introduction

The “community-school” is a part of the history and mythology of Vermont. From Vermont’s establishment as a state, the idea of the “community-school has manifested itself in a theme and variation across the physical and cultural landscape of the state. Throughout, there has remained a deep sense of local control and subsequent local responsibility for our *community-schools*. In many ways, a reciprocal relationship of school and community is embedded within the ethos of our rural state. Likewise, the interdependence among staff with the school and their connections with parents and community members has remained part of the life of the *community-school*. This social compact has formulated the context for how many of our smaller town schools have existed for many years. In most cases, the compact is unwritten or even ever articulated. Yet, this compact is distinctly apparent in the day-to-day activities of the school and the many social gatherings that engage the broader community, and certainly approach to governance.

Context

Our communities are shifting. More retirees seeking a simpler way of life, and perhaps even a sense of community, are taking up both year-round and part-time residency in Vermont communities (UVM Center for Rural Studies, 2006). Vermont’s own economic status, birth rate, property tax burden, and decline in agriculture are part of the dynamic context. Declining student numbers are part of the reality that shapes our schools, communities and their interdependent relationship (Cate, 2006). Overarching these various demographic, economic, political and educational factors represents a societal shift in our sense of community.

Schools serve as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity. “Viable villages generally contain schools; dying and dead ones either lack them or do not have them for long. The capacity to maintain a school is continuing indicator of a community’s well-being” (Peshkin, 1978, p.161). Some see the consolidation of governance, and subsequently schools, as inevitable, due to financial pressure and declining demographics. Pushes to consolidate school governance and encourage consolidation have occurred over the past in Vermont. Now, with Act 46, Vermont is undergoing the most substantial shift in school governance in over 100 years. It is unknown if there will be a noticeable demise of “community” within traditional town boundaries with any shifts that alter the nature of community-schools across the state.

Currently, the presence of the many local school boards is clear evidence of direct involvement in the governance of our small rural Vermont schools. In relation to the broader context of schools and their governance in our country, our present system demands a high level of community involvement in direct governance (Cate, 2006). The institution of Town Meetings

in Vermont provides the opportunity for direct involvement of all stakeholders. There is substantial evidence of a strong belief in community regarding the control and direction of *community-schools* (Cate, 2006). Nonetheless, there remain challenges to sustainability.

Schools face many challenges. Schools are experiencing increased costs in a period of financial uncertainty. Many school face declining enrollments resulting in decreased revenue while at the same time experiencing shifts in student populations that require additional resources to meet student needs. General increased demands for both inputs and measurable outputs add to the list of tangible challenges. The extent to which there is a decline in a sense of community or commitment to traditional community institutions, such as schools, in the face of raising tax burdens is perhaps a more formidable challenge not clearly recognized.

Subsequently, there is a continued need to foster community connections. The need to garner public support for budgets or bond votes has always been, and will remain, a reality. With continued increases in property taxes, school leaders will find it increasingly challenging to maintain good will with citizens (many of whom are retirees) who are feeling the burden. The relationships and trust developed with individuals and groups within school-communities will determine the support for budgets and ultimately, in many cases, the sustainability of schools.

Equally important, we must consider larger societal forces that ultimately influence the state or even local context of school systems. We are increasingly a global economy and society. The competition for 21st century skills places increased pressure on our schools to prepare students for a life of employment that we cannot accurately predict. At the same time, the diversity of cultures that influence our daily lives increase without prediction. Global markets and movement of people bring different racial, ethnic, religious groups and values into communities once perceived homogenous. Even in Vermont, the diversity of refugee resettlement and migrant farm laborers create new opportunities and challenges for towns and schools.

In many locations across the country demographic shifts and spiraling costs are forcing consolidation of *community-schools* (Rural Policy Matters, 2006). In Vermont, at the same time that we are experiencing a decrease in school-age children, we are seeing an increase in people over 65 and retirees transplanting from outside the state (Cate, 2006; UVM Rural Studies, 2006). The flight of the young (often those with highest educational levels) coinciding with the “graying” of Vermont is sure to have implications for education, health care and our economy over the next generation. In many ways, rural hospitals are experiencing similar challenges in adjusting to demographic shifts, and the pressure to consolidate.

Understanding Community and Schools in Society Today

Vermont’s “Northeast Kingdom” is comprised of the counties of Essex, Orleans and Caledonia in the northeastern corner of the state. Combined, these counties constitute the most rural and impoverished area of the state. At the same time, this region is known for holding fast

to local control and remains more as a whole less influenced by outside forces of the world. Regardless of the governance structure, collaboration between schools is particularly challenging due to the geographic separation and unique profile of each community. These two aspects, combined with a strong culture of local control, create an environment in which external initiatives are viewed skeptically at best. Local districts subsequently most often focus on issues at home as opposed to those across the supervisory union. In many respects, the prevailing norms of this governance structure have added to the independent culture of the *community-school*.

There is substantial research and literature that addresses the concepts of school culture and interpersonal connections and how they impact the effectiveness of schools (Barth, 1990; Dufor, 1998; Furman, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1994). It is also important to understand these issues within the setting of small, rural elementary schools in Vermont. In one regard, it is important to understand the importance of relational trust within rural Vermont schools for the sake of supporting those schools in their efforts to best serve their students and communities. Secondly, there is increasing pressure for these smaller schools to consolidate in order to become more cost effective for taxpayers.

A Historical Continuum

For the celebrated educator, and Vermonter, John Dewey, education and community were forged in creating a new democracy and community that would carry America forward in the twentieth century (Dewey, 1916). The attempts of Dewey and other progressive educators of his era saw great hope and promise in the sense of place, purpose and belonging fostered through education (Dewey, 1900). Dewey lived in a dramatically dynamic time of transition from an agrarian to industrial society. Our post-industrial society is equally dynamic in the accelerating pace of the information age. It is therefore even more remarkable that many of Dewey's assumptions and promotions remain salient today.

What makes a collection of individuals a community is not only definitions of who's in or who's out, but also mutual aid among members. "Sharing burdens and bounty is the glue that holds people together," claims Stone (2002, p. 20). In the "polis," mutual aid is seen as a product in itself that people create, collectively, in order to foster and protect a community. Therefore, sharing, caring, and maintaining relationships is at least as strong a motivator of human behavior as competition, separation, and promotion of one's separate self-interests, according to Stone (2002). The ties that unify at the supervisory union level are less apparent and often what is highlighted are the differences or desire for autonomy.

Typical in the polis are "commons problems" or situations where self-interest and public interest work against each other. These collective action problems exist because it is difficult to motivate people to undertake private costs or forgo private benefits for the collective good (Stone, 2002). This is often the case with schools. Despite the common interest to produce an educated citizenry, there is conflict between the various stakeholders based on individual

interests. Ultimately, for many community members it comes down to the self-interest of taxes vs. the communal need for quality schools. Again, we see the more distant the relationship the less apt individuals (or collective individuals of a town) are to support a larger whole.

Under a traditional and contemporary context within local *community-schools*, both inter-relational and intra-relational aspects of community are distinguishable with relatively little observation or analysis. The sentiment that education of youth should take place in *community-schools* appears embedded within the culture of the Northeast Kingdom and evident in many common practices. It is how new definitions of “school-community” may be defined with any transition to consolidation or school choice arrangements that remain undefined.

According to Gail Furman (2002), within the context of our post-modern society, the necessary condition for community is “based on the ethics of acceptance of otherness with respect, justice, and appreciation, and peaceful cooperation within difference. It is inspired by the “global community” metaphor of an interconnected, interdependent web of people and cultures. It is fostered by processes that promote among its members the feelings of belonging, trust of others, and safety”(p. 66).

Schools face the fallout from a thinning of family and communities ties in the continued loss of social capital. Two income families, commuting to work outside of town of residence, combined with effects of family dysfunction, violence and gangs, substance abuse in the home and the decline in social capital increases the challenges place upon schools. Tied to issues of increased multicultural student bodies, recent immigrants and English language learners, schools are increasing challenged in creating community and connecting with communities (Starratt, 2003).

Joyce Epstein has produced some of the most comprehensive work on school and community partnerships. She promotes the term “partnership” to better represent the approach necessary for success. “In partnerships,” according to Epstein (2001), “educators, families, and community members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate success” (p. 4). Epstein believes partnerships recognize the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community important to a child’s overall learning and development. Central to Epstein’s perspective is the understanding of context. Epstein presents two important theoretical frameworks for understanding the relationship between school and home: *Symbolic Interactionism and Reference Group Theory*. Symbolic Interactionism, as cited in (Mead, 1934), assumes that self-concept, personality, values and beliefs are generated from our interactions with others. The theory suggests that we learn how others perceive and anticipate our goals and behaviors, and that we fashion our behavior to fulfill expectations of others and to receive their recognition. Essentially, if teachers do not interact with parents, they will not understand the parent’s expectations for their children and for them as teachers. Likewise, if parents avoid teachers, they cannot be fully informed about the school’s expectations for their children. With interaction, both parties are informed and better understand the other’s expectations and can adjust behaviors to assist students more successfully (Epstein, 2001). This is undoubtedly true among board members, principals and teacher leaders at the local level and when they convene at

the supervisory union level. It is important for school leaders to understand the broader expectations (those effecting the whole supervisory union) while respecting the needs at the local level.

The construct on Reference Group Theory, (Merton, 1968), makes other important connections between esteem and interaction according to Epstein. A reference group, either collective or individual, is taken into consideration by another group or individual to influence their attitudes and behaviors. This happens when one group or individual recognizes the importance of the other or admires the positions and actions of others. At times, only the higher-status group influences the behavior of the other in an un-reciprocating manner. There are times this is accommodated. Other times, this imbalance can cause a lack of trust (Epstein, 2001).

The work of Starratt (2003), Stone (2002) and Putnam (2000) Epstein (2001) recognizes that understanding the changing context of our communities is vital to connecting with them. As a result of the shifts in society, over time there have been changes in the patterns of partnerships between the school and home. In the early 19th century, parents and the community greatly controlled schools. The home, church and school supported similar goals for learning and the integrations of children into the adult community. When not attending school, students learned important skills and knowledge necessary for adult life from families and others in the community. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new patterns of family and school relations developed. Using methods not familiar to parents' experiences, teachers began to teach subjects that were not familiar. There became a separation between the teaching responsibilities at home (ethnicity, religion, family origin) and the common curriculum of school (Epstein, 2001).

"The American public education system is facing multiple challenges that are unique in its history, and its ability to respond will depend on greater public involvement and understanding than has been evident to date," according to Deborah Wadsworth (2006), a senior adviser to the nonprofit group Public Agenda (p. 38). She claims a major obstacle grows out of the crosstalk that public leaders, educators, communities and families engage in so frequently. Often on completely different wavelengths, these various groups are unable to communicate, making very different assumptions about how well schools work now, and how much change schools need (Wadsworth, 2006).

Wadsworth promotes that it is not only important that educational leaders recognize the problems facing schools and that they set appropriate policies, but that parents and community members also grasp the current challenges and participate in formulating solutions. Even with the increased influence of federal and state mandates, education issues such as curriculum requirements, hiring good teachers and providing the resources necessary are local issues that come down to decisions made in communities (Wadsworth, 2006). Defining "local" within the context of a multi-district supervisory union can mean different things. Certainly, a definition that will likely change for any *community-school* with any move to centralized governance. To what extent community stakeholders believe the education of children is either more successful or efficient locally, collaboratively as with consolidation or through closure and tuitioning students will depend in part upon the present context of perceived quality and actual cost in each

school. However, the sense of ownership with a *community-school* may supersede concerns of quality or cost. Today, as indicators of quality and cost become more prominent and perhaps relational, the disposition of “local control” of “our school” may have less salience. Ultimately, to what extent the communal relationships of a *community-school* or to what extent the pressures for quality and cost containment may determine the sustainability of small, rural schools in the Northeast Kingdom are setting the stage for potential dramatic transitions.

Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (2000) provides some of the most poignant reflections on the state of community in America. According to Putnam (2000) child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. Considerable research dating back at least fifty years demonstrates that trust, networks and norms of reciprocity within a child’s family, school, peer group, and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child’s opportunities and choices and, hence on his behavior and development (Putnam, 2000). “States that score high on the Social Capital Index—that is, states whose residents trust other people, join organizations, volunteer, vote and socialize with friends—are the same states where children flourish”(Putnam, 2000, p. 296). Statistically, the correlation between high social capital and positive child development is as close to perfect as social scientists ever find in data analyses of this sort—Vermont is considered one of those states (Putnam, 2000).

Putnam (2000) points out that just because social capital is correlated with “good outcomes for kids” does not mean that social capital alone causes these outcomes. Other influences on child wellbeing such as parent education levels, poverty rates, family structure, racial composition are among a number of other variable that may influence child development. States or communities with disproportionately large numbers of poorly educated adults and low-income single-parents families tend not to not have high evidence of civic engagement as areas where residents have the economic luxury and practical skills to participation. Putnam councils us to be careful to not draw spurious conclusions due to this complicated set of relationships between child development outcomes, social capital, and demographics (Putnam, 2000).

It is a fact that socioeconomic and demographic characteristics do matter, but so does social capital (Comer, et al, 1996; Furman 2002; Merz & Furman, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Sergiovanni,1994; Sergiovanni, 2000). Social capital is only second to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on the lives of children. It is evident that at the same time the negative effects of poverty, youth pregnancy, mortality, and idleness impact schools and learners, community engagement has a strong counter effect (Putnam, 2000). It is also important to recognize a state’s social infrastructure appears far more important than anyone would have predicted in influencing outcomes for child development (Putnam, 2000). “We can draw the same conclusion about the link between social capital and school performance,” states Putnam (2000, p. 302). The Social Capital Index is highly correlated with student scores on standardized test taken at all levels and the rate at which students stay in school. Even after accounting for a host of other factors that affect state educational success—racial composition, affluence, economic inequality, adult education levels, poverty rates, educational spending, teacher’s salaries, class size, family structure...social capital was the single most important explanatory

factor. "This state-by-state analysis reconfirms decades of research showing that community involvement is crucial to schools' success. These studies have found that student learning is influenced not only by what happens in school and at home, but also by social networks, norms and trust in the school and the wider community," claims Putnam (2000, p. 302). In effect, Parent-Teacher Associations were created to institutionalize social capital. The decline of PTA memberships over the past three decades reflects many parents' disengagement from their children's education. "The decline is a shame," states Putnam (2000), "because research suggests that when parents and the wider community work with schools, students benefit in concrete and measurable ways" (p. 302)

The close relationship of stakeholders allows similar definition for *community-school* and that of *school-community*. An analysis of "trust" between all stakeholders associated with a *community-school* is essential to reaching a deeper understanding of attitudes affecting a broader sense of community.

There are predominantly two sets of researchers who have extensively explored the operation of trust in schools: W. K. Hoy from Ohio State, and Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider out of Chicago. Hoy and his colleagues worked from a school climate perspective to develop a definition of trust in schools. Their perspective is that trust exists as a characteristic of the school and maintained as part of the school culture. Hoy, and his colleagues, define trust as a group understanding that both the group itself and the individuals within the group are reliable. Hoy uses a definition of five components of trust: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Benevolence is defined as confidence in the goodwill of others. Reliability is the ideas that someone can be counted on to come through, and competence is the ability to come through. Honesty is a global concept for one's character and includes acting in accordance with what one says, accepting responsibility for one's actions, avoiding manipulative behavior, and behaving consistently. Openness is the degree to which information is freely shared across parties (Kochnanek, 2005).

Researchers Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, (1996, 2001) spent a decade in Chicago schools examining the role of social relationships and their impact on student achievement. They conducted their study using quantitative and qualitative research, longitudinal case studies along with in-school observation and interviews over a period of time that Chicago schools were going through a period of dramatic reform. They concluded that a broad base of trust across a school community lubricated much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans. (Gordon, 2002) Bryk and Schneider (2001) contend that schools with a high degree of "relational trust" are more likely to establish the kinds of changes that help promote student achievement than those where relations are poor. (Bryk & Schneider, 2001).

Bryk and Schneider (1996, 2001) conceptualized trust in schools as a product of the everyday interactions that affect person-to-person relationships in the school. From their perspective, the trust formed between individuals can build to become part of the school culture as well as affect the structural characteristics of the school.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) utilize this framework for assessing the relational trust between principals and teachers, teachers and teachers and between school staff and parents. This study focuses on the relational trust with each stakeholder group outside of school. In small rural schools, the relationships between, the board, the teachers, parents and community members at large is perhaps one of the most important factors in a school's ability to establish a sense of community. In addition, the relational trust between school board members and staff with the public, who have direct access to them, is essential to fostering support for the *community-school*. Trust is in many regards the "glue" that binds together the *school-community*. Ultimately, a large part of this study will seek to understand to what extent does relational trust impact the sense of community necessary to the sustainability for *community-schools*?

Historical Context of the Community-School in Vermont

Numerous studies and recommendations calling for district consolidation in the name of efficiency have taken place over the past thirty years in Vermont, none of which have resulted in actual changes in governance. The debate of school governance and school consolidation in Vermont is not new and must be seen within a broader historical context to better appreciate our current standing.

Vermont's 1786 constitution, states, "A competent number of schools ought to be maintained in each town . . ." thus placing the locus of responsibility on individuals towns to determine what was necessary. It became common for the towns to have many one-room "district" schools within their political boundaries in order to have one located near the students. As communities grew, local families collaborated in hiring a schoolmaster responsible for the education of their children. "District schools" were organized, supported, governed and maintained by the families living within a particular settlement or community within an organized town (Richardson, 1994).

Vermont's school governance system remained little changed through the first half of 20th Century. It was with the addition of union school districts in the 1950's and 1960's that once again the dynamic of the *community-school* adjusted to a new context. The establishment of union school districts greatly altered many community high schools and in some sense created a new, broader school-community. Today, there are 51 supervisory unions and 12 supervisory districts containing 311 schools (buildings) and 284 school districts in Vermont (Cate, 2006).

The Rural School-Community

Whereas understanding the broader societal context for the dynamic relationship between schools and communities is important, there are elements that differentiate the rural school-community. According to Jonathan Sher (1978), "like the parable of the blind men and the elephant, attempts to describe rural America are confounded by both its nature and its dimensions (p. 1). Sher (1978) contends it is easiest to define rural America from what it is not, urban. The characteristics distinguishing rural communities from urban communities are not

clearcut. The distinguishing traits rather form a continuum of rural to urban, with communities falling at different points depending on their size, location, and cultural history (Nachtigal, 1982). Rural communities are far too heterogeneous and complex for simplistic definitions or stereotypes (Sher, 1978). "All too often, rural America is regarded as an anachronism in our modern cosmopolitan society; a place long gone, though warmly remembered, according to Sher (1978, p. 2). Like rural America as a whole, rural school districts are distinguished by their diversity. "Despite increasing standardization," states Sher (1978), rural schools still tend to reflect the pluralism found among the rural communities they serve (p. 3). Consequently, Sher (1978) warns "treating rural schools and school districts as if they were a unified, monolithic entity would be a serious mistake." Nonetheless, both Sher (1978) and Nachtigal (1982) find many common attributes when contrast against urban districts.

Layers of bureaucracy found in more urban and suburban communities are often lacking in smaller communities. Communication subsequently is more direct with verbal transactions often substituted for written communiqués. Validity of information is more likely based on who said it as on what is said. Social relationships are more personal and tightly knit (Nachtigal, 1982). Small-town rural society is generally more integrated. Values tend to be more traditional, with more family structure intact—though changing where there is in-migration. Traditionally, rural communities are more homogeneous in terms of race and socio-economic status. Time is still measured by the seasons of the year rather than the ticking of the clock. According to Nachtigal (1982), "in rural areas, a man's word is still likely to be a binding agreement; trust is not yet a thing of the past"(p. 8).

However, there is a clear dichotomy between locals and outsiders, a distinction not found in the anonymity of an urban or suburban system. This split creates interesting problems for rural school reform efforts. The local, more established community members, have as a first priority maintaining the ties that make them part of the community fabric (Nachtigal, 1982).

In many cases, the school is likely the largest employer in town. Subsequently, school board membership is therefore of often a greater importance than urban areas. School Board meetings are typically held in the evening and seldom attended by members of the community. It is when a delegation does show up that there is likely a significant issue that could not be resolved by direct contact of school personnel (Nachtigal, 1982).

Classes are likely smaller, so teachers know their students and student's parents. School personnel know the board and are accessible to the community. Much of what is cherished by rural communities happens outside of the classroom. The leadership, character building, and socialization skills that come from activities and events are valued as an integral part of the school program. Athletic contests, musical and dramatic presentations serve in linking rural schools and rural communities is extremely important and serve as a source of public entertainment and public pride. "The function of a rural school goes far beyond that of educating children; it is not only a piece of the local social structure, it is often the hub that holds the community together" (Nachtigal, 1982, p. 11).

Local context is important. Rural initiatives, according to Sher (1982), must always be based upon the primacy of local circumstances. "Policymakers who assume that the success of a particular policy or program in one rural area guarantees its success elsewhere, or who attempts to circumvent local traditions, conditions and values are destined to eventual failure" (Sher, 1978, p. 2).

"The small rural school increasingly is finding itself between a rock and a hard place," according to Nachtigal (1982, p. 12). The school traditionally gets its support from the community and is expected to serve at least in part a rural community culture. The school is also seen as part of a state imposed system. It is difficult to argue against legislative mandates in support of special populations such as minority groups and the handicapped. There are reasons however to question some of the mandates on how programs are delivered. Within the personalized social milieu of the small community, intangible benefits should not be traded off too readily for more specialized programs, states Nachtigal (1982). "From the local community perspective, the school that was once 'theirs' is seen more and more as an outsider as more rules of the game are determined by state and federal mandates (Nachtigal, 1982, p. 12).

Rural communities and rural schools continue to exist with their unique qualities. Communities have different characteristics and different needs (Nachtigal, 1982). This is indeed true throughout Vermont and even within the area of the Northeast Kingdom. Although "rural" characteristics tend to be shared among rural communities, according to Nachtigal (1982), real differences exist between rural communities. "The important factors that differentiate a rural community in one part of the country from a community of similar size and isolation in another part of the country appear to be related to the availability of economic resources, cultural priorities of the local community, commonality of purpose and political efficacy" (Nachtigal, 1982, p. 271). "Small rural schools that have traditionally been considered the weakest link in the public school system are now being hit the hardest by the triple threats of declining enrollment, limited resources, and increasing demands for program accountability," stated Paul Nachtigal in 1982 (p. 12). In many regards, these same challenges persist yet today.

Traditionally, rural communities have been fairly homogeneous economically and culturally. However, this is changing in many rural communities where, because of energy development, recreation, or proximity to urban areas, an influx of population has brought in new residents with different values and expectations. When this happens, the consensus about what is best for the community begins to dissolve; goals and power structures need to be realigned. These transitions periods in the life of rural communities can be particularly difficult simply because of the tightly knit personal nature of the social structure (Nachtigal, 1982).

"Vermont does have a unique history, a unique spirit, and a unique tradition—unique partly because is so characteristically rural" (Sher, 1978, p. 261). There is an assertion that local control is only a myth and does not really exist. In some respect this is true in that schools in Vermont are similar to each other and to schools elsewhere in the country. Our perceptions of schools is effectively internalized by national testing services, multinational text books and

curriculum distributors, standardized teacher training programs, college entrance requirements, professional educational organizations, labor needs, and our own educational experiences (Sher, 1978). Further standardization has come through increased state and federal mandates. However, *community-schools* have continued. The heart of the opposition to consolidation, since the early days of the district schools, has been concern over loss of local control. The once self-sufficient Vermont rural villages are no longer economically independent. Yet, this loss of economic independence has had the primary effect of reinforcing and expanding the importance of an independent, locally controlled school system. The schools along with the town meeting, represent the last vestige of localism and self-governance in much of rural Vermont (Sher, 1978, p. 261).

Sher (1978) claims the actual magnitude of a school's individuality and uniqueness is not the main issue. "What is important is the need of people to feel that they have power over the system and over the development of their children, even if that power is illusory and the possibility for radical variance among schools is slight, believes Sher (1978, p. 262).

Today, local control still matters to *community-schools*. However, today rural schools are experiencing the pressure of meeting higher expectations while attempting to offset increased costs like all other schools. In fact, many must face these challenges while experiencing declining enrollments. The combination of the three forces on small schools is pushing them to consider whether they can remain successful and sustainable. Ultimately, the future of *community-schools* should remain within the hands of the local community members.

Conclusion:

There is no conclusive research that demonstrates large scale moves to consolidate schools or governance will assure the desired outcomes of Act 46. So far, the evidence in Vermont is anecdotal and demonstrates a limit to even initial savings. It is too early to tell if newly formed unified union districts will demonstrate savings over time or grow as centralized bureaucracies often do? According to former policy director for the Rural Schools and Community Trust, Marty Strange, centralized bureaucracies become less effective due to multiple layers of communications. According to Strange, "findings in multiple context, there is more trust and transparency in smaller organizations. Simply, people tend to know each other." On the other hand, there is research that demonstrates that smaller districts can have a beneficial impact. Based on extensive research across the country, it is evident to Strange that, "the expected outcome of centralized governance is the closure of small schools." "Universally, a move to larger districts or district consolidation always defies democracy." What is most important is that the decisions are made within the local context.

*See National Education Policy Center, Consolidation of Schools & Districts: What the research says and it means Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson & Jennifer Petrie (included in appendix)

NORTH COUNTRY SUPERVISORY UNION

Alternative Governance Structure Proposal

NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Our community-schools are at a crossroads. Shifting demographics, state initiatives regarding the centralization of governance and even the emerging notion of what community means to us in rural Vermont are all part of the dynamic of our educational landscape. At the same time, our shift in focus around educational outcomes and practices are also undergoing a period of transformation. Our current governance structure is not a barrier to advancing our schools and, in fact, can provide the best approach to meeting the goals and objectives to fulfill our mission. North Country Supervisory Union is committed to the development of *Character, Competence, Creativity and Community*.

Vermont native John Dewey's reflections on governance and community from a century ago remain relevant today. For Dewey, education and community were forged in creating a new democracy that would carry America forward in the twentieth century. The attempts of Dewey, and other progressive educators of his era, saw great hope and promise in the sense of place, purpose and belonging fostered through our schools. Dewey lived in a dynamic time of transition from an agrarian to industrial society. A transition that, in many respects, our communities in Vermont's "Northeast Kingdom" are experiencing more today than 100 years ago.

Our local communities are experiencing an equally dynamic pace of change. North Country Supervisory Union is both reacting to our changing landscape and charting a new direction forward. We need to change our design for learning, not our governance. In fact, maintaining a decentralized approach likely has more promise to achieve the outcomes we seek today. There is an irony to promoting a uniform centralized model just when we are fostering increased personalization. There is an irony that we would likely reduce the level of public engagement with a centralized model, just when we are promoting increased student voice. There is an irony that nationally we see moves to create more decentralized or site-based management approaches. We believe we can strike the right balance between the authority and responsibility of local schools and a supervisory union. North Country Schools are a "community" with a strong sense of shared values, interdependence, reciprocity and commitment to the education of all students. (see Context provided)

We follow the Vermont state motto of "Freedom and Unity" in our approach to governance. Long-time policy director for the Rural Schools and Community Trust, Marty Strange, suggests from his many years of research across the country looking at the concentration of governance, "the shift to larger districts always defies democracy." A move to a centralized governance model would defy our democratic practices and the disposition of our collective communities. NCSU proposes to build upon our current model, not dismiss its value. There is a healthy balance of shared governance

between local school boards and our supervisory union board. At the same time, we recognize that we can do more to promote democratic practices and distributive leadership that will result in more success for our students. We recognize that building upon our current governance practices is essential in order to effectively transform our educational practices.

Currently there is much in the works regarding the development of student-centered learning. We recognize the need to foster more opportunities for students to actively and authentically engage in the discourse and leadership of our schools. Just as we are moving toward a more “learner-centered” approach to build increased student voice, relevance, engagement and aspiration for educational success, we find the State of Vermont going in the opposite direction concerning school governance. We need to foster “community-centered” governance to ensure local voice, responsibility, engagement and aspiration for student and community success.

Though we acknowledge there are some opportunities for economy of scale and efficiency with centralized programs and services, we are interested in maintaining authentic local governance structures. We believe that the best way to ensure the high-quality learning outcomes for NCSU students is to continue to support our community schools and to provide the necessary resources to ensure both the equity of opportunity and equity of need for all learners.

We need to ensure staff, students and community members have a direct and authentic voice in shaping our schools. The education of all learners will enhance with increased participation in decision making at all levels. The NCSU “Commitments” and Design for Learning provide an aspirational framework to advancing a student-centered approach to learning. We are equally committed to identifying those governance practices that will maximize our ability to achieve our goals. By building upon our current governance practices, we will ensure equity, quality, efficiency and transparency to support student learning that will result in the development of character, competence, creativity and community.

We believe that it is essentially more important to foster the right culture and qualities of an adaptive organization, rather than change governance en masse in order to meet the goals of Act 46. According to Ronald Heifetz’s *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, the qualities are:

1. Elephants in the room are named
2. Responsibility for the organization’s future is shared
3. Independent judgment is expected
4. Leadership capacity is developed
5. Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized

We recognize our collective work ahead to fully demonstrate these essential organizational practices. Meeting the goals of equity, quality, efficiency, transparency in a cost-effective way, and ensuring our democratic practices, will depend more on leadership and the culture of our school-community than the structure of governance at all levels.

NCSU PROFILE

NCSU is comprised of thirteen school districts. There are five pre-k to six schools, five pre-k to eight schools, one middle school serving seventh and eighth grades, and one high school with adjourning career center for students nine through twelve. Morgan is a non-operating district that sends students to Derby Elementary School. Jay/Westfield Joint Elementary School is operated through a joint contract between the town school districts of Jay and Westfield. North Country Career Center also receives students from Lake Region Union High School, which is approximately thirty minutes south. Elementary schools range from 40 students to 400 students with most of our schools serving around 100 students. The high school historically was at 1100 students and presently has an enrollment of approximately 700 students. All but one or two of our schools have seen a decline in enrollment over the past ten years. Total population for NCSU is approximately 2500 students. Currently, 53% of our students qualify for free or reduced meals. 77% of our students actually receive free meals due to community eligibility. 25% of our students are receiving services on Individual Education Plans.

North Country Supervisory Union has historically enjoyed steady leadership. Although our turnover of principals has stayed relatively modest, we are challenged to attract a number of qualified candidates. Subsequently, we are working with our regional superintendent's association to provide a local licensing program through Castleton State College. We are entering year two of a two-year cohort. NCSU has six educators participating in this program. This year, the high school has a new principal and there is one new elementary principal. The previous high school principal was at NCUHS for fourteen years. Mentoring is provided to support new principals and leadership development is ongoing for all administrators. The superintendent is entering his fourth year and the two previous superintendents were employed for eight and ten years respectively.

Similarly, we have a modest turnover of board members annually. Of the 63 school board members serving thirteen school boards, we have between 10-20% turnover annually. The supervisory union has a full board and executive committee of the full board made up of representation from each local board. In recent years, there is a more unified approach in the work of our boards resulting in increased centralized supports and services.

There is great social capital in the number of board members directly involved in the governance of our schools. However, we recognize there is room to expand upon our current approach. Although we have a structure that lends itself to a high level of public engagement, we do not often have parents or community members in attendance at local board meetings and less often at high school or SU level meetings. We purposefully engaged in a wide range of community conversations last year to assess the interest of our community regarding governance. Although our boards and administrators provided an objective process to inform our community of their options and seek their input, it was understood that many of them were predisposed to remaining a supervisory union with member districts.

Although there remain individual districts, there is a strong sense of common vision for learning. Historically, districts within NCSU operated more autonomously than collectively. In recent years,

the level of collaboration in identifying a common direction and shared purpose has increased. Subsequently, there are increased programs and services at the supervisory union level.

There is an increased understanding and implementation of student-centered learning practices in all our schools. It is fair to say, we have made more progress with our elementary schools than our high school. There is a need to shift a high school culture that is focused on a traditional delivery of instruction. The implementation of personal learning plans is mixed across grades seven through twelve. Our elementary schools have begun to implement student-led conferences.

We have elementary and middle schools that have a one-to-one computing environment and begun to move to more project/problem based learning opportunities. A large number of teachers have visited King Middle School in Portland, ME, and we are seeing a shift toward a more “expeditionary learning” model that is interdisciplinary and project-based. Thus far, implementation of project/problem-based learning has been more wide spread in our elementary schools and at the middle school level.

We are looking at how we might build upon our current structure. There is a great belief that we must maintain a healthy balance of centralized capacity building and decision making while supporting true local responsibility and authority to make determinations based on the context of individual schools. We are actively engaged in learning about best practices in developing a “shared governance model” that authentically involves board members, administrators, staff, students and community members.

PROCESS

After a period of reflection and consideration of the Boards, NCSU initiated a comprehensive process to inform our community members of the goals of Act 46, options under the law and to assess the disposition of our communities. We began with a Full Board retreat in September of 2016. After our retreat, we engaged in a series of discussions across communities. We created a tri-fold pamphlet for wide distribution and began to utilize our website and a Facebook page to expand access to information. This included the creation of a short video to help explain Act 46. We trained 17 board members to conduct “meetings in a box” and worked to set up meetings in almost all communities. We provided an online survey that resulted in 568 responses. When asked, “under Act 46, Vermont’s 2015 education law, the proposed “unified union model would eliminate community-level school boards and create one large regional board. What do you think about this idea?” 71% of respondents strongly opposed and 11% somewhat opposed the idea of centralization.

Based on the feedback from community meetings and from our survey, it is very evident that community members do not wish to consolidate governance.

District to District Discussions

The summer and fall of 2017 we began conducting a series of “District to District” meetings to consider the following questions:

1. *How do our schools currently work together? What is working well and how might we improve upon our current arrangements?*
2. *Are there opportunities for new or additional collaboration between our schools? (programs, staffing, combining resources, etc.)*
3. *Is there any reason to consider combining governance between two or more Districts?*
4. *How might we work as a supervisory union to meet the goals of Act 46?*

Boards and Administrators have identified a wide range of areas where schools are collaborating across the supervisory union currently and ways in which we can expand. There is currently no interest in considering any unified union districts, with the exception of Jay/Westfield, which operates under a joint contract. There was a minimal interest in looking at the potential cost/tax implications of Morgan and Derby forming a unified union, but no plan to move forward with a formal consideration.

Fall Forums

This past fall we initiated a series of “Fall Forums” to provide an open public comment period on our draft Alternative Governance Structure plan. Although we had light turnout for these conversations, we did receive positive comments regarding our process and direction. Boards will shift “Fall Forums” to local considerations next year.

We have a strong understanding that we need to continue to foster supervisory union wide and district-to-district conversations to further the goals of *equity, quality, efficiency and transparency*.

Current Relevant Work Addressing the Goals of Act 46

NCSU and member districts were working to address the goals of Equity, Quality, Efficiency, Transparency, in a cost-conscious manner prior to Act 46 becoming law. In many respects, our “self-study” associated with Act 46 is essentially a continuation of an ongoing process of data collection and reflection. The NCSU Annual Report was established for the supervisory union Annual Meeting in March of 2015 to provide a baseline of information to guide our decision-making. We added the data collection regarding curricular and programmatic offerings in each school in the spring of 2016 in anticipation of data to be collected in consideration of either a formal study committee or self-study associated with an AGS. There is a general practice of being “data informed” when it comes to our budget process or considering continuous improvement plans. We have learned more about ourselves and what we need to address from our close review of the Vermont Education Quality Standards, annual assurances process and participation in a pilot Integrated Field Review.

This Narrative attempts to provide an accurate picture of how we have addressed and are addressing the five goals of the law. In addition, we provide some “Recommendations” of how we may move forward. Below, we provide a small case study of making decisions to do what is best to meet the needs of our children, demonstrating that this can be done in both a collaborative and

individualized manner, where decentralized governance was not a deterrent and actually provided the best opportunity for success.

Case Study: NCSU Early Childhood Programs

Our pre-school programs and early childhood services represents a strong example of balancing roles, responsibilities and costs between the supervisory union and the local level to provide the best results for children.

Early childhood education has always been a priority at North Country Supervisory Union. There has been an evolution of how we provide this service, growing from playgroups to formal classroom options.

Prior to the universal preschool Act 166, and for over 20 years, our supervisory union implemented a compensatory based program with five satellite classrooms across our region. Only one of these satellite classrooms was in a school building. Children could attend any of the programs that matched families' needs for locations and schedule. All classrooms offered a morning session and an afternoon session, but transportation was not always available. A partnership for transportation did occur for families in Newport City, but this was not possible for other towns. About one hundred children on average, per year, were enrolled in these programs.

These classrooms offered great programs for the children and families that could take part. While the initial placement was based upon educational need, there were always some spaces available for those who were not identified as being in need. The funding for these classrooms came from Title I monies.

Five of our ten schools did also offer preschool classrooms in their buildings. These programs generally provided morning sessions for children and space was limited. About 50 children on average were enrolled in these programs. Early Childhood Special Education services have occurred wherever the children are located. This includes the five compensatory programs, the five school based programs, as well as at other childcares or homes.

A change in the administration of our early childhood program and supervisory union, as well as Act 166, provided an opportunity to look at how we were providing preschool education in our region. Decisions were made to decentralize our preschool programs and put them into school buildings. This would allow for better access for families as well as potentially provide a more seamless transition to kindergarten for the children and families.

We saw a dramatic increase in the number of children who could participate once we decentralized our programming. We have 250 children attending our school-based programs this year and another 30 attending partner programs. We also have helped children to become more familiar with their home schools, which they will attend for kindergarten. Teachers and staff from the schools are familiar people and are resources for them. This helps children to be ready for the learning in kindergarten much sooner than when the building is a foreign place until that first day of kindergarten.

Previously, centralized preschool programs helped us to maximize the efficiency of our staffing. It made it easier for the adults, but in the long run did not provide access to the programs our children and families needed. Early childhood learning opportunities that support the readiness for school are more accessible and prevalent now that we have decentralized the options. We continue to strive toward universal preschool for all children, where they need it and where it makes the most sense. For many of our families, that is in the community where they live and in the school their children will attend. Our schools proudly claim to be “pre-k through six” and “pre-k through eight schools” that are well served in partnership with an NCSU Coordinator for Early Childhood programs and Early Essential Education teachers and staff.

QUALITY

After a year-long process of review and discovery during the 2014-15 school year, the NCSU Leadership Team, comprised of school principals and central office administrators, recommended the NCSU Commitments and Design for Learning to our Supervisory Union Board for approval in September of 2015. Since the Board’s approval, our Leadership Team has devoted our work and learning to the establishment of our “Commitments” and implementation of the Design for Learning. We endeavor to be mission centered, learner driven, standards based and data informed in our approach. We have achieved a great deal of progress within the last three years and have much momentum to sustain us moving forward.

Nonetheless, we recognize there remains much yet to still accomplish. This spring we will convene a “Learning Design Council” (comprised of a wide range of stake holders, including parents and students) to assess the implementation of our current Design for Learning and to make recommendations on the next iteration for board approval next September. We anticipate that we will continue to refine our work at the strategy level for both the supervisory union and individual districts as we move forward.

NCSU is beginning its second year working with the Great Schools Partnership out of Portland, Maine on advancing personalization and proficiency based outcomes. We have established cross-curricular standards/ “Transferable Skills” that are K-12. We began work last year on defining content proficiencies and will continue that work this year along with defining clear learning progressions.

At all levels, we have recognized the need to increase a more personalized approach to learning. NCUHS is now in its second year of having a “Pathways” Coordinator to support a wide range of on-line, self-designed academic study, early college and external learning opportunities. In addition, we also now have a part-time person who works specifically to support work-based learning experiences for students. Although co-ops are fairly well established in the Career Center, we are still developing a system, practice and culture around external learning opportunities for students at NCUHS who are not in career center programs. With the help of a \$267,000 planning grant from the Barr Foundation, we will reflect on our current status and plan thoughtfully to ensure we gain

traction on a full implementation. We would like to also expand to include community based learning and service learning opportunities at all schools.

In recent years, we have dedicated considerable effort to establishing effective multi-tiered systems and supports that includes a continuum of academic interventions. Likewise, we continue to build our capacity to meet the needs of students with social and behavioral challenges. In addition to building out a “Behavior Team” that consists of four behavior specialists and five behavior team assistants, we have created programs to support students with intensive needs at North Country Union Junior High School and Newport City School that are accessible to students from other schools. We have shifted from a special education assessment to a special services assessment to build capacity and allow for the deployment of behavior specialist for all schools based on need.

Meanwhile, we continue to support positive learning environments in all schools through a range of supports and practices. We have provided training and support for PBIS, Responsive Classroom, Mindfulness and Restorative Justice. In recent years, we have expanded professional development and technical assistance to schools in being trauma informed.” This fall, we hired a School Nurse Leader to provide supervision and support for schools served by LPNs and assist in the training and coordination of nurses across the supervisory union. We established the position of Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist and Wellness Coordinator to support our work with a wide range of stakeholders through the NCSU Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community Committee.

While we have school-based decision making in various forms throughout NCSU, we continually strive to create common structures, systems, opportunities, and supports so that we meet the needs of each child and provide equitable learning opportunities. Curriculum content coaches, special education instructional specialists, behavior specialists, interventionists, and special educators all support teachers and students using common frames.

Literacy, math and science coaches work with teachers to ensure continuity of curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Coaches provide targeted professional development, structures for feedback and reporting, and in-class peer instructional coaching. Trained peer mentors and designated teams of teacher leaders also learn and implement common means to support teachers and students to succeed, all supported by the SU. We have done a great deal of work to refine our continuum of support with a focus on strengthening Tier 1 instruction and in-class supports for students.

Design for Learning

We work collaboratively across the supervisory union in advancing a comprehensive design for learning in the service of all our students. Creating systems and structures so that quality, equity, and access are achieved is primary. Although there are differences in programming and delivery, we believe we are providing students with substantially equal access to a quality education. While we have site-based management in various forms throughout NCSU, we continually strive to create common structures, systems, opportunities, and supports. Following are some examples:

- Commitments and Design for Learning: The entire NCSU Community from 13 towns – students, teachers, staff, parents, board members, community members - all participated in a multi-year planning effort to make explicit our beliefs, values, opportunities, outcomes, goals, and objectives.
- Instructional Frameworks: Our leadership and instructional coaching staff created one page frameworks spelling out “gold standard” instruction as a model for teaching and learning.
- Common Assessment Calendar: Administrative and teacher leadership created and update annually our Local Common Assessment Plan, focusing on literacy and mathematics, but reaching to other core areas, as well.
- Continuum of Instruction: Our Special Services and Instructional Supports – recognized by the VT AOE as exemplary – and our general education instructional support staff have extended and personalized the 3-tiered MTSS model to include 5 tiers or phases of supports for all students, including in the general classroom, intervention supports, intervention/special education supports, and more intensive special needs supports. Our goal is to provide as much commonality of structure and support at Tier 1 as possible.
- Common Instructional Practice: Strengthening Tier 1 for students is our focus of work, before EST Processes, and IEP Processes are implemented for supporting students, as outlined in other sections. Supports to professionals and to students are provided by Curriculum Content Coaches, Special Education Instructional Specialists, Behavior Specialists, and Interventionists using common frames. We also provide supports for students who are homeless or English Language Learners at the SU level.
- The part-time Instructional Innovation Coordinator provides support to principals and teachers in the implementation of project based learning, personalization and effective feedback/assessment practices.

Our common curricula and systems include, for example:

- Bridges Math K-5
- CMP3 Math 6-8
- Workshop Approach to Reading and Writing
- Danielson Framework for instruction
 - Supervision and Evaluation
 - Mentoring and Instructional Peer Coaching
- Supports with CCSS and NGSS
- VCAT as a database to support data informed professionals

Afterschool and summer programming: NCSU provides 21st Century learning through our “Encore Program” after school and summer programming, open to all, to enhance our K-12 system.

Common NCSU-wide and school based professional learning opportunities: Our Learning Design Team works with school leadership and faculty to plan and provide a plethora of embedded, after school, released time, and out of district PD for teachers, administrators, and staff. Areas of focus include, but are not limited to:

- Common System of Feedback and Reporting Including: Common Progress Reports, Celebrations of Learning, Student-led Conferences & E-Portfolios
- Proficiency Based Learning and Personalized Learning Planning with Great Schools Partnership and League of Innovative Schools
- Expeditionary Learning for Project Based Learning through the Upper Valley Educators Institute
- Facilitative Leadership – SRI Training for Protocol Use and Facilitation
- Mentoring and Peer Instructional Coaching
- Math Bridges Implementation Supports
- Support for Implementation of Reading and Writing Workshop
- NGSS Science Work
- OGAP – Ongoing Assessment in Mathematics Program
- Up for Learning – Increasing and Enhancing Student Voice and Choice
- Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning
- Walk-throughs
- Supervision and Evaluation
- Leading Change
- Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing in Education

All of this work is centralized, coherent, cohesive and builds common effective practice across our thirteen schools and communities, while allowing for flexibility and appropriateness of implementation and delivery within schools. Engaging in, supporting, and evaluating this work at the supervisory union level demonstrates our commitment to quality.

NCSU has a wide range of partnerships and organizations that regularly collaborate with our schools. Currently, we are working with the Great Schools Partnership on personalization & proficiency based learning across our supervisory union. Although the bulk of the work is focused on our high school, we have taken much attention to ensure there is vertical and horizontal alignment with our junior high school as well as pre-k to 6 and pre-k to 8 schools. Both our high school and career center are working with Up for Learning to increase student voice.

The NCSU Leadership Team, comprised of building administrators and central office staff, is the main group that works collaborative across the supervisory union. There are currently steering committees that also have faculty representation that are guiding the work on proficiency based learning and feedback/grading practices. We are committed to fostering distributive leadership, and this past summer 25 teachers and administrators were trained in facilitated leadership through the School Reform Initiative (SRI) program.

Assessment Data

Our data demonstrates there are mixed outcomes for students, that includes an achievement gap for students from poverty and those on Individual Education Plans. There are many variables that influence these variations: school culture, quality of staff, quality of instruction or design of learning, fidelity of curriculum or program implementation, and in some cases access to services. As is demonstrated in data across the state and nationally, demographics do, at times, have an impact on student outcomes on standardized test results. However, it is understood that we are never to use demographics as an excuse, as we also know there are examples of schools within our state that perform at levels at or above state averages even with high poverty. We have achievement gaps between sub-groups, between schools and to some extent between our supervisory union and other supervisory unions/districts. There remains work to be done to close these gaps and raise achievement for all students.

That said, it should be understood that we are not a “data driven” supervisory union. We are data informed. There remain concerns about assessing learning, and subsequently schools, solely based on quantifiable outcomes on statewide assessments in two or three subject areas. We recognize, and welcome Vermont’s shift to a more comprehensive approach to “accountability,” yet remain cautious about data collection and how it may be used.

Although there is a strong common effort to ensure students graduate ready for college, career and citizenship, there remains a need to increase a focus on fostering aspirations for post-secondary education. The NCUHS graduation rate has averaged 87% over the past five years. During the same period of time, between 2012 and 2016, NCUHS has had a post-secondary participation rate of approximately 45% within the first two years after graduation. Although it certainly is our goal to have a 100% graduation rate, we believe it is realistic to have a rate that is consistently above 95%. In addition, we’d like to see an increase in post-secondary education exceeding 65% annually with an additional 35% employed.

Recommendations

❖ *Continue to be data informed:*

There is a need to support the effective use of quantifiable and qualitative data at all levels. We currently have access to or collect a great deal of data. There is a need to enhance our practices around the review of data and how we then act upon that data.

❖ *Continue to implement the Design for Learning & Review/Revise as necessary:*

The NCSU Design for Learning articulates clear and common goals and objectives. We need to continue to develop the strategies for implementation and operationalization. By the end of this school year, we will also conduct a review of the Design for Learning and make recommendations for revision to the NCSU Board in September of 2018.

❖ *Establish a NCSU Learning Design Council:*

NCSU has convened an ad hoc group of teachers in past years to serve as a Learning Design Council. This group was previously seen as a conduit for information around SU wide initiatives. There is a need to shift this group (including parents and students) into having more

of a voice and influence in shaping the direction of initiatives generated from our Design for Learning.

EQUITY

The National Equity Project defines educational equity “that each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential.” NCSU has looked closely at both equity of opportunity and equity of need across our supervisory union. We have worked hard to ensure we meet the Vermont Education Quality Standards set forth by the Vermont Board of Education and we made additional investments in staffing this year. Currently, we are meeting all requirements outlined in EQS. We have centralized services for behavior and social emotional learning to ensure we meet the needs where they exist, not solely based on who allocates resources for them.

We have established an Annual Report that highlights a wide range of indicators to help us to be data informed. In a number of cases, providing local boards with data trends has helped them to understand what adjustments they should make to provide more equitable situations. We recognize that we still have ground to gain in terms of equity in our schools and between our schools.

This September, NCSU hosted a Fall Forum on Understanding Poverty in Education with the support of the Public Asset Institute and Voices for Vermont’s Children. We invited a wide range of community stakeholders and partners, including our State Senators and Representatives. In addition to affirming our commitment to equity and providing the right disposition and capacity to support students and families from poverty, we developed a resolution intended to encourage the Vermont Legislature to increase the weighting for poverty in the state funding formula, along with committing to other investments to ensure our capacity to support children and families in need. NCSU is a member of the Vermont Rural Education Collaborative and is committed to working with others to address equity across the state.

Support Staff Terms and Conditions Policies & Collective Bargaining Agreements: Over the past two years, we have committed a great deal of effort to establishing more common support staff terms and conditions policies and Negotiated Agreements. Our districts are now almost identical concerning terms of employment. However, differences in the rate of pay and benefits that are substantial remain between some schools. There are goals to close this gap, which we may implement over several years to diminish the impact of increased cost associated with leveling up.

We recognize that there are inequities within our schools and between our schools that we need to continue to address. However, we believe there remain greater inequities between our supervisory union and region with those in some other parts of the state.

NCSU Special Services

With approximately 25 percent of the NCSU student population qualifying for special education and many other students requiring other forms of support such as intervention and consideration

related to their learning variance, it is more critical than ever to maximize meaningful access for all learners in the general education classroom. The NCSU Continuum of Instruction supports a culture of shared responsibility for all learners. This process, created by the NCSU Learning/Design and Special Education departments, has become a primary resource to support systems change in our schools to address learner variability rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction.

Both Special Education Teachers and School Interventionists have come together several times a year for the last two years to fine tune and integrate this “all hands on deck” philosophy within their daily instructional practices. NCSU has taken the opportunity to align the Educational Support Team (EST) process with the Continuum of Instruction. The EST goal for the current school year is to foster increased student access to the learning as illustrated within the NCSU Continuum of Instruction.

We are fortunate to have exceptional capacity in our continuum of Special Services. We have two instructional coaches/mentors and two neurodevelopmental specialists along with a neurodevelopmental assistant who assists in the implementation of student plans.

As Special Education staff embark on the third year of the Learning Profile Strand, special educators are utilizing their knowledge of the characteristics and components of a student's learning profile to learn to create comprehensive programming for students. Our goal is to provide access and opportunity for all NCSU learners.

Recommendations

❖ *Ensure equity around wages and benefits:*

Continue to look at wages and benefits for support staff across the supervisory union. We have four collective bargaining units with four distinct agreements. It will likely take another bargaining cycle or two to reach a level of equity that is appropriate.

❖ *Co-Curricular & extra-curricular opportunities*

Review and monitor participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to ensure we are providing substantially equal access for students.

❖ *Middle Schools Programs*

Continue to look at differences in middle school programming and identify collaborative ways to provide access to curricular opportunities that may be limited.

EFFICIENCY & COST EFFECTIVENESS

In many regards, we continually are looking at and expected to demonstrate efficiency. Our communities tend to hold local boards' feet to the fire when it comes to spending. In some respects, it can be argued that historically we were not spending enough in some of our local schools. Likewise, representatives to the supervisory union board hold central office accountable for spending. We have created a positive culture that recognizes the supervisory union as more of an asset than merely an assessment. Overtime, there has been more readiness to embrace increased

centralized programs and services. In many respects, we do demonstrate an economy of scale given our size as a supervisory union and likely surpass some Unified Union Districts.

Historically, most of our schools have annual spending that is below state averages. We recognize that this is in part due to low wage rates. In cases where spending per-pupil has increased in recent years, it has been mainly due to declining student enrollment. We recognize that our costs are predominantly driven by staffing and schools have made appropriate adjustments in recent years. NCUHS has decreased its teaching staff from 68 teachers to 54 in five years and is proposing a FY2019 budget that is lower than FY2014. Although staffing has fluctuated in schools based on student numbers, other factors such as growing needs for students, increased expectations for outcomes and educational quality standards have all contributed to increased staffing at times. Schools do share staffing in many cases such as physical education, art, music and nurses.

Special Education

Special Education is in its second year of being “centralized.” We approach our process as a partnership with local schools. Currently, special education para educators are school district employees. There have been considerations of bringing speech language assistants under the SU, but this is currently not embraced by our local association. Whereas there is more equity in sharing the cost of special education and special services (i.e. behavior specialists), we have not seen any efficiencies through this “economy of scale.” In fact, we are seeing a sharp rise in cost due to high needs students and out of district placements. We have made some strategic moves in staffing special educators, but this is primarily due to a prioritization of need associated with unfilled vacancies.

Pre-School/Early Essential Education

With the adoption of Act 166, NCSU ended any “center based” programs that were focused on the delivery of services for those students eligible for Early Essential Education. Subsequently, we were able to eliminate the cost of approximately \$90,000 annually for two stand-alone facilities. All schools, with the exception of NCUHS/NCCC and NCUJHS, are pre-K to six or pre-K to eight schools.

Human Resources

We have a Human Resources Coordinator and Assistant who support all our schools.

Financial Services

We have a Director of Finance, Assistant Director, Staff Accountant, four individuals responsible for bookkeeping, and one person who shares bookkeeping responsibilities with the coordination and support for our food service programs. Specific bookkeeping services are provided either as a fee for service or, in five cases, retained by the local district.

Transportation

We believe we are providing student transportation efficiently and cost effectively given our context. There simply is no easy way to mitigate geographic distances in a large rural area. (see study provided)

Information Technology Services

An outsider, looking into North Country Supervisory Union (NCSU) from the internet landscape, would see a Pre-K to 12 school system. Based on network diagrams, the first step in the process took place around 2003-2004 when the school districts in NCSU made the decision to pool their resources and consolidate their computer network services, which accessed the internet through a common connection located at NCUHS. Over the years WAN bandwidth has increased from 6 Megabits per second (Mbps) on copper lines in 2004 to 4 Gigabits per second (Gbps) on fiber lines in 2017. Eventually this will be upgraded to 10 Gbps service in conjunction with upgrades to E-911 compliant phone systems.

In 2011, we began consolidating all domains in NCSU under one domain, ncsuvt.org. In order to avoid unnecessary disruption, all schools' cloud based services were consolidated under one domain over a three-year period. By 2015 all internal server systems were using one domain. These moves have made it much easier to transition students between schools as they advance from elementary to middle to high school.

Prior to the domain consolidation effort, each school was spending an inordinate amount of time creating new accounts in multiple systems every year. In addition, student work and student records in one school were not always easily transferred with the student to the new school. For example, at one point student health records were maintained in 12 different databases maintained by each school nurse. By consolidating the nurses program, SNAP, into one database, student health data only needs to be entered once and students moving between schools only require a change to the school they are currently attending in the database. This is also true of PowerSchool, InfoSnap (PowerSchool Registration), DocuSped, VCAT, Google, Office365, and SchoolMessenger.

Through collaboration, schools not only realized a cost savings, they also realized a savings in time through the elimination of unnecessary duplication of effort. The end result was more efficient utilization of resources, including IT resources, which could be better utilized supporting students. There are still some concerns regarding tech support and more importantly technology integration across the supervisory union. Some schools have more capacity based on size. There may be some additional opportunities to consider shared personnel in order to provide both capacity and consistency across the supervisory union.

Recommendations

❖ Monitor staffing ratios and adjust accordingly:

Our cost effectiveness predominantly comes down to staffing. We need to remain vigilant in looking at our staffing at all levels across the supervisory union.

❖ Ongoing assessment of transportation services

Although our transportation study was conclusive that fully centralizing transportation would not be more cost effective, there remains a need to continue to review our approach. With transportation and special education being supervisory union functions, we are currently coordinating transportation services for students in out of district placements from central

office. There may be a need to expand our capacity to both coordinate and provide these services.

❖ ***Maximize grant funds and consider additional funding sources:***

We need to ensure that we maximize use of current grant funds and continue to explore competitive grant opportunities at the local and supervisory union level.

TRANSPARENCY

Paul Costello, Executive Director for the Vermont Council on Rural Development points out, “there are two Vermont’s--separated often by level of education and income.” Working class and poor families generally are not engaged, nor do they participate at the same level of their more educated and wealthy neighbors. We recognize that we need to establish a more inclusive and more participatory process for authentic engagement of all members of our school-community. We are facing a dynamic time in education and our ability to build public support will depend on greater public involvement. Schools need to cultivate increased two-way communication to bridge the various assumptions parents and community members have about how well schools work, and how much schools need to change. We believe strongly that a multi-district supervisory union is the best option for maintaining access and trust with our communities.

Individual local school district boards with individual budgets are more transparent than a centralized model with a single budget. Yes, there remains a question regarding the public’s vote on supervisory union expenditures. We believe that given the mandate of special education, and substantial federal dollars associated, it would be very difficult to have the public vote on a supervisory union budget that has such large expenditures tied to Federal mandates and Federal funds.

Currently, there is very low turn-out at our NCUHS annual meeting. Although we believe we should work at increasing turn out, we are concerned that we would not get large numbers of people to attend an SU annual meeting. There are opportunities for discourse at the local level when it comes to budget development and presentation of local budgets. We believe we provide local boards with essential information to inform the public regarding special services expenditures and delivery of services to support transparency.

NCSU participated in the AOE Integrated Field Review process in 2016. We embrace the idea of both self-reflection and outside observation. Many of our schools use surveys for parent feedback and we are working on a more comprehensive approach to using perception surveys and qualitative data.

Recommendations

❖ ***Enhance opportunities for student voice and engagement in governance:***

NCSU schools will explore the development and enhancement of student leadership. We would build upon current structures and explore new ways to increase authentic student voice and a role in decision-making. We currently have a student representative to the high school board

and the career center advisory board. None of our elementary schools have an established practice of student representatives. There is an interest in enhancing the current practice at the high school level and developing a practice at the elementary level. There is also an interest in developing a model where a high school board representative and student from a member town regularly attend local school district meetings. This would help to keep local boards informed of developments at the high school and career center and provide better access to community members who at times can live as far as 30 miles away from where high school meetings are held in Newport.

❖ ***Support active and effective parent organizations at all levels:***

Many of our school based parent organizations struggle to sustain active membership and function effectively. There is a need for training for parent leaders and principals on developing effective strategies to help these organizations be a positive example of social capital to lend a voice and active support to the direction of schools.

❖ ***Provide training for board members, administrators, staff, students and community partners on public engagement:***

Based on the success of an initial training with Public Agenda this past spring in the region there is an appreciation that a wider range of individuals immediately connected to NCSU would benefit from training.

❖ ***Town Meetings, Fall Forums & Community Conversations:***

Vermont Town Meetings are often held up as a standard of local democracy. They still offer direct participation and voice in local governance that is not seen in other parts of the country. There is a need to determine how best for town meetings to be well attended and productive in the future. It is essential that we provide the opportunity and incentive for working parents to participate in town meeting. We are also at a time that we need to expand upon our traditional models of governance and public engagement. NCSU school-communities have begun establishment of "Fall Forums" that would bookend our current Town Meetings in March. Fall Forums would be based around the concept of "Community Circles." The goal is to involve students in both Town Meetings and Fall Forums.

❖ ***Expand Community Partners:***

We strongly believe it is essential that our community partners are active participants in many trainings when appropriate. Building our shared capacity is necessary to support our collaboration and to sustain initiatives. All schools work closely with Siskins Ecological Adventures and the North Woods Stewardship Center to access environmental and adventure based learning. Jay Peak provides cost effective ways to support access for school ski programs. North Country Hospital is an active supporter of work based learning for students in our Health Careers program at NCCC. There are many informal relationships with community based organizations and businesses. In many cases, our schools in outlying areas are often the hub of the community and provide a place for meetings and community based collaboration.

❖ ***Voter Registration & Participation:***

Unfortunately, many parents and community members are not registered voters, or if they are, do not always vote. We believe we should establish a comprehensive voter registration drive to expand both parent and community participation.

CONCLUSION

There is much evidence that NCSU member districts are collectively responsible for all pre-kindergarten through grade 12 students. There is no question that board members and principals have a primary responsibility to their respective community-schools. However, there is much that happens at the supervisory union level that indicates there is a shared sense of purpose and commitment to all our students.

There is a positive esprit de corps and relationship between districts. Principals are regularly willing to support each other and there are a number of examples of shared personnel. The evidence is clear that our supervisory union maximizes efficiencies through economies of scale and the flexible management, transfer and sharing of nonfinancial resources when possible and appropriate.

It is believed that North Country Supervisory Union has the smallest number of school districts practicable, at present, to provide a competent number of schools for convenient instruction and learning opportunities for our children. Depending on demographic developments in the years to come and the disposition of our communities, there may be reasons to consider fewer districts within a supervisory union model.

NCSU recognizes the right to a public education is integral to Vermont's government and guarantees of political and civil rights. Further, NCSU recognizes the right to education is fundamental for the success of our children as well as our State's economic and social prosperity. We believe to keep our democracy competitive and thriving, our students must be afforded substantially equal access to a quality education. Subsequently, we believe for our community members to remain fully vested and committed we must maintain the local democratic decision-making process that determines the direction of our schools.

One of the strengths of Vermont's education system lies in the rich diversity and the ability for each local school district, and supervisory union, to adapt its educational program to local needs and desires. Subsequently, school-communities must possess the opportunity to adapt their governance to meet the local needs and desires while ensuring equity, quality, efficiency and transparency. Therefore, it is the desire of NCSU to maintain local boards while collectively committing that our children will be afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in advancing the development of character, competence, creativity and community.