

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Governance Team

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education find that the proposed unified union school district formed by the Montpelier School District, which is its own **SUPERVISORY DISTRICT (MSD)**, and the Roxbury School District, located in the **WASHINGTON SOUTH SUPERVISORY UNION (WSSU)** is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts,” and will the State Board therefore vote to approve the attached report of the **Montpelier-Roxbury Act 46 Study Committee (Study Committee)**?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- 1. That the State Board of Education finds that the proposed formation of a new unified union school district by the Montpelier School District and the Roxbury School District, to be named the MONTPELIER-ROXBURY SCHOOL DISTRICT, is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c(b).**
- 2. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the attached report of the Study Committee.**
- 3. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the temporary assignment of the new unified union school district, if approved, to the MSD for administrative and other transitional assistance. Assignment would be for the interim period beginning on the date on which the unified union school district becomes a legal entity pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706g and ending on July 1, 2018, and would not modify the governing structure of the existing systems.**

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 706c; Act 46 of 2015, Sec. 7, as amended

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I. General

The Montpelier School District is a PK-12 district that operates schools for all grades. It is its own supervisory district.

The Roxbury School District is a PK-12 district that operates a school offering PK-6 and pays tuition for students in all other grades. Together with the Northfield School District, it forms the Washington South SU.¹

¹ On May 2, 2017, the Northfield electorate voted to merge the district with the Williamstown School District to become the Central VT UUSD, a unified PK-12 district that operates all grades. The Central VT UUSD will be part of a larger SU with the newly merged Orange and Washington School Districts (PK-8 operating / 9-12 tuitioning), which – together with Williamstown – are the current member districts of the Orange North SU.

II. The Montpelier-Roxbury School District

The Montpelier-Roxbury Act 46 Study Committee proposes the creation of a UUSD that would provide for the PK-12 education of resident students by operating schools offering all grades (New Unified District) beginning on July 1, 2018.

The Study Committee identifies the following school districts as “necessary” to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706b(b)(1): Montpelier; Roxbury.

The Study Committee does not identify any school districts as “advisable” to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 701b(b)(2).

In FY2017, the combined PK-12 average daily membership (ADM) of the two “necessary” districts is 1,122.82 (Montpelier: 1,036.32; Roxbury: 86.5).

If approved by the State Board, the electorate of each “necessary” district will vote on June 20, 2017 whether to approve creation of the New Unified District.

The New Unified District, which would be known as the Montpelier-Roxbury School District, would unify two existing PK-12 school districts into a single district responsible for operating all schools within the district and would replace two current governing bodies with one unified union school board.

Except as provided in Article 4(d), Roxbury students in Grades 5-8 will enroll in the middle school program operated in Montpelier, and high school students will enroll in the Montpelier High School. Article 4(d) provides “grandfathering” provisions for students whose tuition was paid by the Roxbury School District as of May 1, 2017.

The Study Committee’s report anticipates that New Unified District “will provide transportation for Roxbury students, grades 5-12, to and from Montpelier, both at regular commuting times and in a manner that provides reasonable access to after-school activities.”

The New Unified District would be governed by a unified school board of nine members who would have a total of 16 weighted votes, with seven members initially allocated to Montpelier (with 2 weighted votes each) and two members to Roxbury (with one vote each). Membership would be closely proportional to the towns’ relative populations and would be adjusted if necessary to reflect each decennial census. Each member would be elected by the voters of the town in which the member resides.

A school could be closed during the first four years of operation only if approved by the voters residing in the town in which it is located. In years five and after, a school could be closed upon a majority vote of the Unified District School Board.

If a school building is closed and would no longer be used for the direct delivery of student education programs, then the town in which the school building is located would have the right of first refusal and could purchase the property for \$1.00, provided that the town agreed to use

the property for public and community purposes for a minimum of five years. The proposal includes provisions addressing use for these purposes for fewer than five years.

All future votes on the budget, Board membership, and other public questions would be by Australian ballot.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: By enacting Act 46, which incorporated the provisions of Act 153 (2010), the General Assembly declared the intention to move the State toward sustainable models of education governance designed to meet the goals set forth in Section 2 of the Act. It was primarily through the lens of those goals that the Secretary has considered whether the Study Committee’s proposal is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c.

The Study Committee recognized that the

proposed merger involves two current districts that seem, at first glance, to be unlikely partners. The two districts are not contiguous. It is 17 miles between the centers of the two towns. Montpelier is large, by Vermont standards, serving 1,036 students and Roxbury is very small, even in Vermont, serving 86 students. One operates schools for all students PK-12. The other operates a school for students in grades PK-6 and tuitions all secondary students to other schools. Montpelier has been a free-standing “supervisory district” for most of its history. Roxbury has long been a member of the Washington South Supervisory Union, sharing a superintendent and support services with Northfield.

The Study Committee acknowledged the wide difference in socioeconomic levels in the two communities (e.g., 25.62% of Montpelier’s elementary-aged students are eligible for free-and-reduced-price lunch (FRL) compared to 57.14% of students in the Roxbury Village School). Due to Roxbury’s small size, however, the Committee was unable to comment on the students’ relative performance on standardized tests as a whole or disaggregated for students receiving FRL or special education services.

After a detailed review of elementary school programs, the Committee concluded that similar opportunities are available in both communities, with the largest areas of difference involving prekindergarten and after-school programs. Nevertheless, the Committee noted that due to Roxbury’s “lack of control” over tuitioning costs, “pressure continues to be applied to reduce the quality and quantity of education that can be delivered at the elementary level.”

Although the report indicated that most educational and financial benefits would accrue to the students and taxpayers of Roxbury, the Study Committee listed a number of ways in which unification benefits the Montpelier School District. For example, additional students “will help stabilize the overall cost-per-student over the long-run” and Montpelier students will benefit both from being with students from a more rural area of the State and from “explor[ing] different types of learning in a more rural setting.” See pages 7-8 of the report.

The Study Committee stated that:

Both districts understand that the issues that have driven Act 46 are statewide in

nature and will continue to pose challenges for our neighboring districts. Neither district is afraid of fully exploring additional options. What this unification will do is allow the new Montpelier-Roxbury district to engage in future discussions with other districts on its own terms rather than being required to react to a plan imposed by the State Board.²

EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee identified a range of potential educational benefits associated with merger, including (the following bullets are quoted from page 11 of the report):

- Provides greater diversity of student experience—Unification will provide some greater diversity in student experience for students in grades 5-12. Roxbury is very small with limited opportunity for varied relationships. Montpelier is more “town” or “city”-- Roxbury is more “country.”
- Creates the opportunity for sharing current programs and resources—Montpelier has some specific offerings not available to Roxbury students. Roxbury brings a rural setting, a small school, and farm-to-school connections.
- Provides an opportunity to create distinctly different models between locations in Montpelier and Roxbury.
- Provides an opportunity to re-think the transition to middle school for all students—the introduction of Roxbury students at grade 5 will necessitate rethinking the entire process to assure that all middle school students get off to a smooth start and are well supported in the transition.

For a list of educational benefits specific to Roxbury students, *see* pages 11-12 of the Committee’s report; for Montpelier students, *see* page 12.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Montpelier School District has excess capacity in its middle and high schools that will allow it to educate the additional Roxbury students “with little investment of new resources.” Financial benefits of eliminating tuition payments will be realized in the future, however, due to the “grandfathering” of Roxbury’s students in Grades 7-12.

The Study Committee estimated cost reductions of approximately \$75,000 due to support services and infrastructure that Montpelier’s current system can assume.

² Montpelier: As originally enacted, Act 46 did not exempt pre-existing supervisory districts from potential merger by the State Board under the final Statewide Plan. Both Chambers of the Legislature recently approved an amendment to Act 46, Section 10 that exempts supervisory districts if they have an ADM in excess of 900. As a result, if the Montpelier School District chooses not to merge voluntarily in this or another proposal, the State Board cannot require it to do so.

Roxbury: The State Board does not and has never had authority to require two dissimilar districts to merge their governance structures. If this merger proposal is not successful, there are no other districts in the region that have the same operating / tuitioning structure as Roxbury. Therefore, the State Board would likely assign the Roxbury District (with its current structure) it to a supervisory union for “administrative, planning, and educational services.”

The Study Committee notes that a larger district will help stabilize tax rates for Roxbury residents, which has experienced great fluctuations due to its small size and tuitioning and which has benefited from the 3.5% hold-harmless calculation that is now being eliminated.

See pages 12-15 and Appendix A of the report for more details. *See also* Act 46, as amended, for cost implications to the State.

The Study Committee's proposal is aligned with the goals of the General Assembly as set forth in Act 46 of 2015 and with the policy underlying the union school district formation statutes as articulated in 16 V.S.A. § 701.

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