

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 Danville School District, located in the **CALEDONIA CENTRAL SUPERVISORY UNION** (CCSU), and the Cabot School District and Twinfield Unified Union School District, located in the **WASHINGTON NORTHEAST SUPERVISORY UNION** (WNESU) 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 **CDT 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 Cabot School District, the Danville School District, and the Twinfield Unified Union School District, provisionally to be named the CDT UNIFIED UNION 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 CCSU 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; Act 153 of 2010, Secs. 2-4, as amended; Act 156 (2012), Sec. 15, as amended

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I. General

The WNESU consists of two PK-12 districts:

- the Cabot School District, which operates one school for all grades for students residing in Cabot
- the Twinfield Unified Union School District, which operates one school for all grades for students residing in Marshfield and Plainfield

The CCSU consists of four PK-12 school districts with three distinct models of governance:

- the Danville School District, which operates schools for all grades
- the Barnet School District and the Walden School District, both of which operate schools through grade eight, pay tuition for all remaining grades, and (together with the Waterford School District) are presenting a merger proposal to their voters on May 23 (the proposed Caledonia Cooperative UUSD)
- the Peacham School District, which operate schools through grade six and pays tuition for all remaining grades

After passage of Act 46, five of the districts within the two SUs formed two distinct study committees under 16 V.S.A. § 706. The Caledonia Cooperative Study Committee presented its proposal to the State Board at its March 2017 meeting and will present it to the electorate of each community on May 23, 2017. The CDT Study Committee will present its proposal to the State Board at its May 16 2017 meeting, and, if approved, will present it to the electorate of each community on June 20, 2017.

- If both proposals are approved, then the new unified districts would be eligible for tax rate reductions and other transitional assistance available under the “Side-by-Side” program established in Act 156 of 2012, Sec. 15.
- If the voters approve creation of the CDT proposal, but the Caledonia Cooperative proposal is not approved by its voters, then the CDT Unified Union School District will not be formed unless the 2017 Vermont General Assembly enacts legislation that would otherwise enable the CDT Unified Union School District to receive tax rate reductions and other transitional assistance.

If both proposals are approved, then both study committees intend that the two new unified districts will be members of a new, enlarged supervisory union that would include the Peacham School District. Given the variety of potential outcomes related to these two proposals, the uncertain governance decisions of other districts in the region (e.g., the Blue Mountain SD), and the State Board’s need to respond to other requests for SU boundary changes in the region (e.g., the Kingdom East UUSD and the NEK Choice UUSD) – it would be premature at this time for the State Board to define the precise boundaries of an enlarged supervisory union. We advise the State Board to wait to evaluate these issues until after the governance structures in this region are clearer.

II. The CDT Unified Union School District

The CDT 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): Cabot, Danville, Twinfield.

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

In FY2016, the combined PK-12 average daily membership (ADM) of the “necessary” districts was 865.19, broken down as follows: Cabot-162.74; Danville-326.23; Twinfield-376.15 (Marshfield-212.39; Plainfield-163.76).

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 provisionally as the CDT Unified Union School District, would unify two existing PK-12 operating school districts into a single district responsible for operating all schools within the district, would replace three current governing bodies with one unified union school board, and would combine two supervisory unions into a new, larger SU.

On the first day of full operations, high school students residing in all four member towns would be eligible to attend either of the *two* high schools operated by the New Unified District under intra-district choice policies to be developed by the District’s board. The New Unified District would not operate high school grades in Cabot.

The New Unified District would be governed by a unified school board of nine members, with two members initially allocated to Cabot, three to Danville, two to Marshfield, and two to Plainfield. 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 town would never have fewer than two representatives.

A school could not be closed during the first four years of operation unless approved by the voters of the town in which the building is located. In years five and after, a school could be closed upon (1) a 75% vote of the Unified District School Board after at least three public hearings, with at least one member from each town voting in the affirmative and (2) subsequent ratification by a majority of the voters in each of the individual member towns.

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 separate provisions addressing sale of the Twinfield school building.

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 developed a comprehensive vision for a new unified union school district, identified guiding principles, evaluated current challenges in their systems, and considered the opportunities and challenges inherent in unification.

Unlike many other districts that have presented proposals to the State Board, the three districts included in this proposal do not have a long tradition of collaboration. The Study Committee observed, however:

In truth, no future is ever certain. ... What is known is that the dual challenge of declining enrollments and increased educational cost facing each of our communities shows little sign of abating any time soon.

To fully address these challenges, the committee has been led to the conclusion that all of us must confront whether maintaining our current educational cultures truly supersedes the benefits of coming together. Moving beyond what we know and what we are used to is hard. But throughout the course of this study, the committee has come to realize that we all share a common desire to do what is best for our children. ... [W]e have come to understand that there is more that unites us than that divides us.

The Study Committee reviewed and analyzed a wide variety of information including enrollment trends, spending trends, staffing patterns and ratios, allied arts offerings, student assessments, short- and long-term capital needs, and other data.

The Committee identified 14 potential models for restructuring the delivery of education, first narrowing the focus to five potential models and then to two models plus the option of submitting a proposal to maintain the current governance structures.

Each potential model was evaluated regarding its capacity both to “provide sustainable and more affordable educational programs” and to “better utilize teachers and resources ... to [s]trengthen instruction for every students [and e]nhance program opportunity ... at a more affordable cost for taxpayers.” The Committee’s report lists the “core feedback” from community forums and identifies the opportunities and challenges of each of the top five potential models that the Study Committee considered.

The Study Committee ultimately concluded that the best restructuring option involves closing the Cabot High School and maintaining those grades at the Danville and Twinfield schools. Although grades 9-12 would no longer be operated in Cabot, the Study Committee believes that Cabot’s more project-based instructional programs should be integrated into the other two schools.

EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee identified a range of potential educational benefits in its proposal, including:

1. The ability of each of the three schools to continue to operate PK-8

2. The opportunity for high school students in the four towns to choose between the two high schools to be operated by the New Unified District, perhaps on a semester-by-semester basis
3. The ability to interact with a larger cohort of peers
4. Increased access to more opportunities in the allied arts
5. Enhanced co-curricular options
6. The opportunity to redirect operational savings to enhance existing instruction

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee's report stated that consolidation of the two supervisory unions would streamline operations and reduce administrative redundancy. It identified potential ongoing Central Office savings of \$360,000 per year (in addition to the projected \$273,000 savings from the Caledonia Cooperative proposal).

In addition, it identified over \$400,000 in annual savings due to the proposed high school restructuring. These savings would be offset by additional costs for transportation and other items, resulting in a projected net annual savings of \$175,000.

Finally, the Study Committee projected an estimated 0.5% - 1.0% reduction in annual growth in spending due to maximizing operational efficiencies (e.g., large-scale purchasing, contract negotiations, and better asset coordination) that could equal approximately \$65,000-125,000 over a five year period.

Overall, the Study Committee estimates that its proposal would result in potential cost reductions of \$2.7 – 2.8 million over a five-year period.

See also Act 153, as amended, for cost implications to the State.

In making this recommendation, the Secretary acknowledges the proud history of these communities and the sense of loss that is an inevitable part of any transition, even a transition that promises to leave these communities able to provide stronger and better community-based education into the future.

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.

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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