

A Proposal Recommending Unification and Re-drawing
Supervisory Union Boundaries
(Alternative Concept Governance Plan)

Presented by:

Bradford Elementary ID and
Oxbow Union High School District #30

Recommended to:

Vermont State Board of Education and
Vermont Secretary of Education

December 26, 2017

Abstract

This proposal recommends to the Vermont State Board of Education both the unification of four PK-12 school districts in Orange and Caledonia Counties, dissolving a Supervisory Union and a Supervisory District and drawing boundaries for a new Supervisory Union. This recommendation is prepared to provide factual documentation that supports a more effective and efficient administrative model to support the highest quality education for children and move all of the districts to compliance with the goals and requirements of Act 46 and the Vermont Education Quality Standards.

Districts to Unify

District	Grades	Student #'s	County
Blue Mtn. Union School #21	PK-12	416	Orange-Caledonia
Bradford Elementary School	PK-6	220	Orange
Newbury Elementary School	PK-6	138	Orange
Oxbow UHSD #30	7-12	349	Orange

Supervisory Union and Supervisory District to Merge

SU or SD	Grades	Student #'s	County
Blue Mountain Union SD #21	PK-12	416	Orange-Caledonia
Orange East Supervisory Union #27	PK-12	1336	Orange

Membership in New Supervisory Union

Districts	Grades	Student Numbers	County
New Unified District	PK-12	1123	Orange-Caledonia
Thetford Elementary	PK-6 & Designated HS	406	Orange
Waits River Valley USD #36	PK-8	223	Orange

Total

1752

Discussion of Importance:

Currently the Rivendell Interstate Supervisory District is bordered by the member schools of the new proposed Supervisory Union. {See map- Appendix A) It would make sense to include this Interstate District in the unification of the Blue Mountain District, the Oxbow District, the Bradford District and the Newbury District. They all have "like" governance structures and geographically they are very close together. It appears that Rivendell will be challenged to operate independently because of their declining student population. This may be seen as an opportunity for all involved in this proposal. If this unification was successful the new unified district would include 5 districts with an approximate population of 1623 students. The new proposed Supervisory Union would increase from approximately 1752 students to 2252 students.

Historical Context:

In the summer of 2016 the school districts of Blue Mountain, Bradford, Newbury and Oxbow {known as BBNO) created an Act 46 Study Committee. This committee, using Wayne Gersen as a consultant, began discussions and started to analyze data to unify the four school districts. {see Appendix B) Two of those districts were already union districts {Oxbow UHSD #30, grades 7-12 and Blue Mountain USO #21, PK-12) and two were PK-6 elementary districts. These governance structures could be unified because students in all of the existing districts had the same educational opportunities. {They offer Pk-12 education for all students with no students being tuitioned) Both the Bradford School District and the Newbury School District operate PK-6 elementary schools and both districts are members of the Oxbow UHSD and their grades 7-12 students attend that high school. The PK-12 students of Groton, Ryegate and Wells River all attend Blue Mountain USO. The BBNO Study Committee met until December of 2016. Although baseline data shows the districts that were considering merger are comparable in terms of teacher staffing, within the provisions for special education and support services, free and reduced lunch, and student performance on standardized tests, {please see Appendix C, D and E) committee members had philosophical differences that could not be overcome. The BBNO

Study Committee formally suspended its activities without any conclusions on November 9, 2016. (see Appendix F)

Current Proposal:

The school boards of the Bradford Elementary School and the Oxbow UHSD believe they cannot meet the five goals of Act 46 with their present governance structure. The five school boards have a long history of functioning as separate, self-focused and self-determining entities. Member districts of the Orange East Supervisory Union are not yet fully compliant with the mandates of Act 153, (ie. special education, teacher negotiations, curriculum, etc.) due the lack of cohesion. The direction from the Vermont Board of Education states that "the Goals are best met by a school district that is responsible for the education of its PK-12 students, is a supervisory district, has an ADM of 900 students and is organized as a preferred, unified system." The Bradford and Oxbow boards realize that by November 30, 2018 the State Board of Education must issue a mandatory statewide education governance plan that, to the extent necessary to meet the Goals of Act 46 and to the extent possible and practicable, merges non-merging districts and clusters them into more unified systems.

This proposal by the Bradford School Board and the Oxbow School Board asks the State Board of Education to consider an alternative governance plan that suggests a new Supervisory Union composed of three member districts, each with its own school board:

First- the plan proposes that the actions taken by State Board of Education finalizes the governance consolidation begun by the BBNO Study Committee in the following ways:

1. The Blue Mountain Unified School District, the Bradford Elementary District, the Newbury Elementary District and the Oxbow Unified High School District would be merged to become a single PK-12 district with one school board.
2. The boundaries of the Blue Mountain Union School District #57 and the Orange East Supervisory Union #27 would be changed to include both governance structures in a new, single Supervisory Union.

Next- The new Supervisory Union would be made up of three school districts, each with its own school board and include:

1. The new unified district proposed above.
2. The Waits River Valley. USD #36, a PK-8 district that tuitions high school students.
3. The Thetford Elementary District, a PK-6 district that contracts their high school students to Thetford Academy.

Finally- If possible within the by-laws of the Rivendell Interstate School District #64 or with the support of future legislation, include Rivendell in the unification of Blue Mountain USO, Bradford SD, Newbury SD and Oxbow USD. Rivendell would benefit from being a member of a larger unit and the other schools could benefit from Rivendell's more effective instructional practices. It is also helps to regionalize the fragmented Upper Valley districts.

Impact on Students:

The attached letter (Appendix H) from Charles "Skip" Barrett, Bradford resident and prior principal of Bradford Elementary School, encapsulates some of the long-term, systemic challenges within the OESU governance structure. The fact is that there is a functional and cultural need for change if our schools are to provide effective 21st Century learning experiences for students.

In November, the boards of the Bradford and Newbury Elementary Schools and the Oxbow Union High School participated in a joint meeting that included a presentation by the current interim superintendent, Dr. Sandra Stanley. The presentation focused on the problematic functioning within the supervisory union by applying the four organizational frameworks as developed by Bolman and Deal (Appendix I): structural, political, human resources and symbolic. Evidence of dysfunctional long-term and current practices were cited. Some example were:

- Non-compliance with current Act 153 legislation,
- Absence of an agreed upon and implemented SU curriculum,
- Significant turnover of leadership (35 administrators since 2002)
- Boards prioritize different values, shoot at different targets, and have no common vision, etc.

While all boards members agreed that they could do a better job working together,

both the agreement and meeting ended with the struggle to bridge the gap created by differing priorities. It will be impossible, based on past and current practice, to improve learning opportunities for students until a governance restructure places everyone at the table and a common vision is the first order of business. There must be an interdependency for that to happen.

At the heart of this proposal is an attempt to use the elements within Act 46 as tools to reshape public education for the children within the Upper Valley region. This is a thoughtful, long-term approach that offers students the potential for increased choice, increased access, and a better chance to receive quality core instruction.

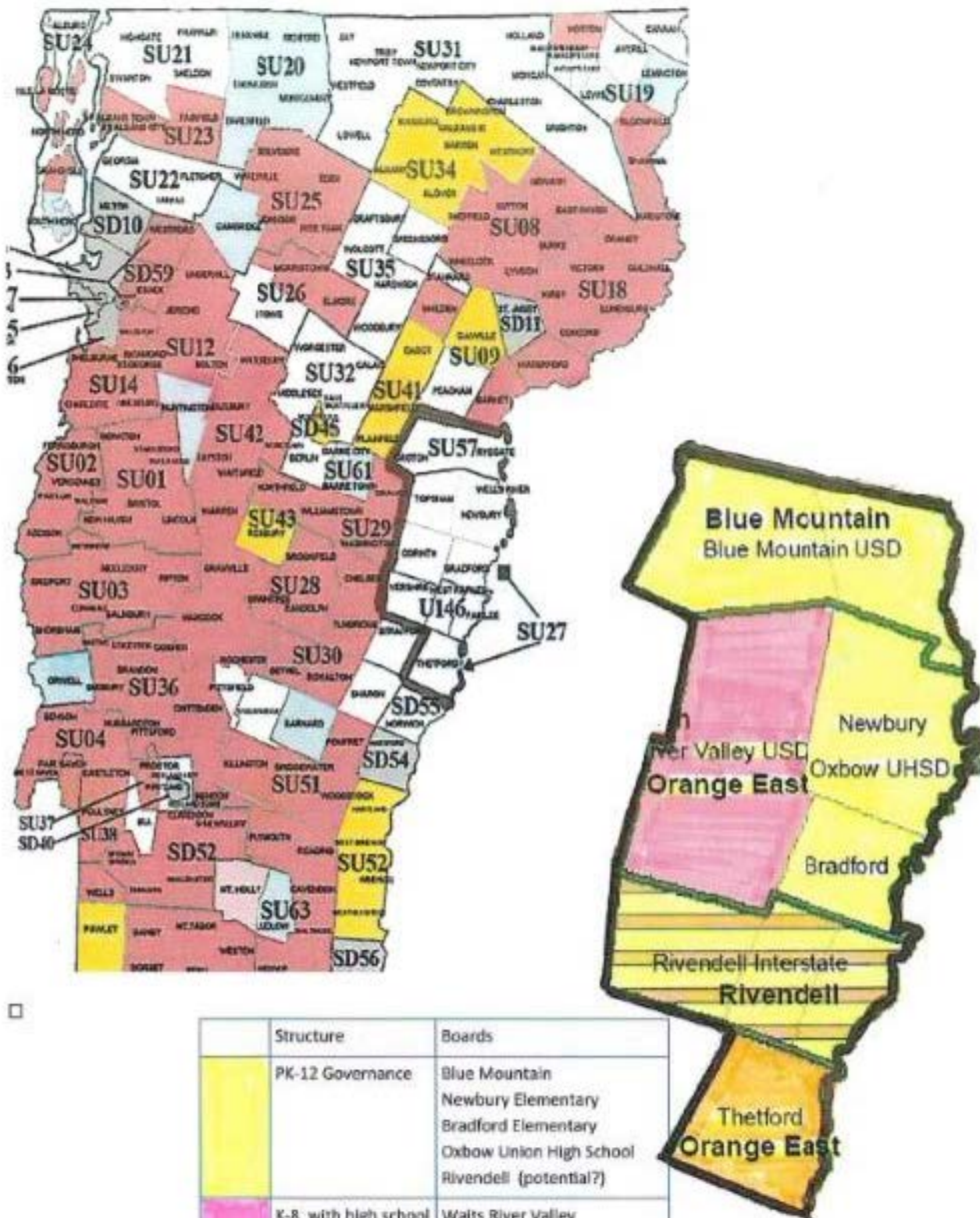
Conclusion:

This proposal is inclusive and does not isolate any districts in this region. Its boundaries are the Caledonia Central SU to the north, the Orange North SU and the White River Valley SU to the West, the Dresden Interstate District to the south and the New Hampshire border to the east. This proposal suggests a regional governance structure that immediately reduces six school districts to three school districts and merges a Supervisory District and a Supervisory Union into a single Supervisory Union. If Rivendell was included there would still be only three school districts and a single supervisory union

The immediate benefits of this proposal would be the reduction of administrative costs by closing either one or two supervisory districts. Students would have a common curriculum across the region, more opportunities found in larger governance structures, and greater access to support services. Teachers would have a single employment contract that would give administration more flexibility in using personnel and reduced costs in negotiating contracts. Also, teachers would have greater opportunities for growth with common staff development.

This is not a new concept for this region as discussed in Appendix G. At the present time, the Bradford School Board and the Oxbow School Board support this proposal. Newbury School District, Waits River Valley School District and the Thetford School District will be presenting Alternative Governance Structure Plans. We are presently not aware of the plan for the Blue Mountain Union SD

The time has come for difficult decisions to be made. The boards of both districts supporting this proposal hope the State Board of Education will act to unify the governance structures as presented. They look forward to working on behalf of the communities' children with their regional counterparts as a unified board.



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ACT 46 STUDY COMMITTEE MEETING

Newbury Elementary School

November 9, 2016

Present:

Committee Members: Brent Abare, Chair (Blue Mountain), Angeline Alley (Blue Mountain), Angela Conrad-Schlager (Oxbow High School/RBCTC), William Ellithorpe (Oxbow High School), Bruce Stevens, (Blue Mountain), Tara Russ (Bradford), Tom Page (Blue Mountain), Paul Jewett (Newbury), Melissa Gordon (Bradford), Judy Murray (Blue Mountain), Lucas Barrett (Bradford), Danielle Corti (Newbury)

- I. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM by Brent Abare, Chair
- II. Roll Call of Committee members showed a quorum present
- III. Citizen Comments
 - a. Research cited that BMU is, indeed, located in Wells River
 - b. Stressed importance of schools working together and improving communication among professionals, with emphasis on the betterment for all students, not just your own school
 - c. Both BMU and Oxbow have a lot to offer, and the thought that we need to close BMU just because it's small is just not acceptable
- IV. Approve minutes of last meeting
 - a. Motion by Bruce Stevens, seconded by William Ellithorpe to approve the minutes of the October 26, 2016 Act 46 Study Committee meeting. Motion voted on and approved unanimously
- V. Review Options for BBNO (Wayne Gersen)
 - a. Looking only at the numbers, it is just not working for this merger to occur
 - b. There would be additional educational advantages at the secondary level
 - c. Suggested configurations for merger
 - i. Blue Mountain houses PK-6 students from its current catchment area and middle school students in grades 7-8 from its catchment area as well as Bradford and Newbury
 - ii. Newbury and Bradford become PK-6 schools
 - iii. Oxbow becomes the high school serving all students in the BMU towns, Bradford, and Newbury
 - d. Blue Mountain could abandon its merger efforts with Bradford and Newbury and engage another K-12 district in discussions on the creation of a K-12 merger
 - i. Possibly need to engage other districts in a side-by-side configuration
 1. (However, Danville is already in conversation with two other K-12 districts, and Rivendell is not required to engage in merger discussions)
 - ii. BMU convert to a K-8 choice district, merge with Waits River Valley, and form a side-by-side with the newly created K-12 district formed by merger of Bradford, Newbury, and Oxbow

- h. Anything that reduces the number of Boards is a good thing, and anything that helps with communication is a good thing
 - i. Wayne Gersen: Maybe he, Emilie Knisley, and Beth Cobb can talk with the State Board of Education to see what plan might be brokered
 - j. Wayne Gersen is not seeing a path forward as things stand now.
 - i. Each Board needs to have a conversation.
 - ii. Maybe there can be a "non-incentive" understanding
- VIII. Questions and Answers
- a. Dismay at the law not allowing a consultant to assist with alternative structure
 - b. Is there a reason BMU-Newbury couldn't merge, and Oxbow-Bradford couldn't merge?
 - i. Two Boards, one Superintendent, School Choice is already in place
 - ii. Newbury Elementary students would attend BMU for high school, with school choice still available.
 - iii. Could Waits River work into that equation?
 - iv. Choice between BMU and Oxbow for high school?
 - v. Possibly one high school would transition to be a science high school and the other could be an arts high school.
 - vi. At present, almost 50% of BMU's 11th and 12th graders attend River Bend for part of the day.
 - c. Tomorrow Wells River is hosting a forum to address the drug problems in our communities at 6:30 PM at the Wells River Village Garage
 - d. Chip Conquest: The more you look at what is possible under the Act as it exists now, and ask Does this work? Why doesn't it work? will be helpful when talking with the AOE.
 - e. Chip Conquest invited any interested individuals to come to the Baldwin Library in Wells River on November 14th at 7:00 PM for a meeting to discuss Act 46
- IX. Future Meetings
- a. All committee members will go back and meet with their respective Boards
 - b. BMU will be having a Board Retreat on November 30th so requested that the next Act 46 meeting be after that.
 - c. Decided to schedule the next Act 46 Study Committee meeting on Wednesday, December 14, 2016 at BMU at 5:30 PM

Meeting adjourned at 7:30 PM

Respectfully submitted:

Nancy N. Perkins, Act 46 Study Committee Minutes Clerk

To: B-B-N-O Act 46 Committee
 Fr: Wayne Gersen, Act46 Consultant
 Dt: September 27, 2016
 Re: **Baseline, Test Data for B-B-N-O Schools**

The accompanying excel spreadsheet provides baseline and testing data from the Agency of Education website on each of the four schools that comprise the proposed merger of Blue Mountain, Bradford, Newbury, and Oxbow districts. The spreadsheet has three tabs: Baseline, SBAC-EL, and SBAC-SEC. An overview of the findings from each of the tabs is provided below:

BASELINE DATA: This sheet provides data on staffing, salaries, and student demographics. The findings:

- **The four schools are comparably staffed:** Each school is within 7.5% of the mean in terms of pupil-teacher ratios, an indication that the boards hold similar values in terms of staffing.
- **The disparate staffing ratios for administrators is a function of school size:** While there is a disparity in both teacher-to-administrator and student-to-administrator ratios, both ratios are driven by the size of the schools.
- **The mean salaries are widely divergent:** An analysis of these disparities will be presented at an October meeting.
- **The percentage of students receiving special services is virtually identical,** an indication that all schools use comparable methods for identifying students needing special education and other supports.
- **The percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches is virtually identical**

SBAC-ELEM: This tab provides data on student performance in elementary grade levels (grades 3-6) as measured by the Smarter Balance assessments given in 2015-16. The highest performing school on each assessment, determined by the highest percentage of students who score at "Proficient or Above", is highlighted in yellow. The findings:

- **The highest performance levels are evenly distributed:** Blue Mountain performed highest in two different grade level tests, Bradford was highest in three grade level tests, and Newbury was highest on two grade level tests.
- **All schools performed below the state average on the majority of assessments:** Newbury matched the state level on 5th grade ELA, Bradford exceeded the state in Grade 5 Math, and BMU exceeded the state in Grade 6math. Otherwise, the highest performing schools fell below the state mean. On the other five tests, none of the schools met or exceeded the State average.

SBAC-SEC: This tab provides data on student performance in secondary grade levels (grades 7-11) as measured by the Smarter Balance assessments given in 2015-16. The highest performing school on each assessment, determined by the highest percentage of students who score at "Proficient or Above", is highlighted in yellow. The findings:

- **The highest performance levels are evenly distributed:** Blue Mountain performed highest in two different grade level tests, Bradford was highest in three grade level tests, and Newbury was highest on two grade level tests.
- **All schools performed below the state average on the assessments:** Neither of the schools met or exceeded the State average on any of the tests administered in grades 7, 8 or 11.

BASELINE DATA FOR B-B-N-O SCHOOLS

	<u>BMU</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>Oxbow</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>State</u>
Student:Teacher	9.15	10.43	9.48	9.75	9.70	10.45
Teacher:Administrator	21.75	24.84	15.30	17.80	19.92	9.40
Student:Administrator	199.00	259.00	145.00	173.50	194.13	98.26
Average Teacher Salary	\$55,334.69	\$49,440.78	\$44,569.53	\$52,129.00	\$50,368.50	\$57,062.61
No Support Services	74%	78%	76%	79%	77%	73%
Special Ed	16%	16%	24%	15%	18%	15%
Education Support Team	4%	na	0%	na	na	7%
Students wih 504	6%	na	0%	na	na	4%
Free-Reduced Lunch	50%	48%	47%	46%	48%	38%

SBAC 2016 Results B-B-N-O Schools

GRADE 3 - ELA	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	27	29	22	6107
Average Scale Score	2391	2407	2360	2438
Proficiency Cut Score	2432	2432	2432	2432
Proficient with Distinction	14%	17%	4%	29%
Proficient	25%	24%	22%	24%
Partially Proficient	18%	24%	13%	23%
Substantially Below Prof.	40%	34%	59%	22%
Total Proficient and Above	40%	41%	27%	53%
Total Below Proficient	59%	58%	72%	46%

GRADE 3- MATH	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	27	29	22	6107
Average Scale Score	2399	2430	2376	2442
Proficiency Cut Score	2436	2436	2436	2436
Proficient with Distinction	11%	17%	9%	23%
Proficient	22%	34%	18%	32%
Partially Proficient	22%	17%	27%	23%
Substantially Below Pr of.	44%	31%	45%	20%
Total Proficient and Above	33%	51%	27%	55%
Total Below Proficient	66%	46%	72%	44%

GRADE 4- ELA	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	32	28	17	5867
Average Scale Score	2446	2448	2431	2477
Proficiency Cut Score	2473	2473	2473	2473
Proficient with Distinction	12%	14%	11%	24%
Proficient	25%	21%	17%	20%
Partially Proficient	31%	25%	29%	25%
Substantially Below Prof.	31%	39%	41%	53%
Total Proficient and Above	37%	35%	29%	46%
Total Below Proficient	62%	64%	70%	46%

GRADE 4- MATH	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	32	28	17	5867
Average Scale Score	2412	2451	2459	2482
Proficiency Cut Score	2485	2485	2485	2485
Proficient with Distinction	0%	3%	17%	19%
Proficient	12%	32%	23%	30%
Partially Proficient	37%	35%	23%	32%
Substantially Below Prof.	50%	28%	35%	17%
Total Proficient and Above	12%	35%	41%	49%
Total Below Proficient	87%	65%	58%	50%

SBAC 2016 Results B-B-N-O Schools

GRADE 5 - ELA	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	30	27	12	6044
Average Scale Score	2424	2509	2471	2515
Proficiency Cut Score	2502	2502	2502	2502
Proficient with Distinction	3%	22%	25%	25%
Proficient	13%	29%	32%	32%
Partially Proficient	20%	25%	19%	19%
Substantially Below Prof.	63%	22%	22%	22%
Total Proficient and Above	16%	51%	58%	58%
Total Below Proficient	83%	48%	41%	41%

GRADE 5 - MATH	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	30	27	12	6066
Average Scale Score	2445	2510	2464	2509
Proficiency Cut Score	2528	2528	2528	2528
Proficient with Distinction	6%	18%	16%	21%
Proficient	3%	33%	8%	21%
Partially Proficient	26%	22%	33%	30%
Substantially Below Prof.	63%	25%	41%	25%
Total Proficient and Above	10%	51%	25%	43%
Total Below Proficient	90%	48%	75%	56%

GRADE 6- ELA	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	34	31	20	5952
Average Scale Score	2525	2530	2507	2539
Proficiency Cut Score	2531	2531	2531	2531
Proficient with Distinction	11%	12%	5%	20%
Proficient	32%	38%	30%	35%
Partially Proficient	35%	32%	45%	24%
Substantially Below Prof.	20%	16%	20%	19%
Total Proficient and Above	44%	51%	35%	56%
Total Below Proficient	55%	48%	65%	43%

GRADE 6- MATH	<u>BM Elem</u>	<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Newbury</u>	<u>State</u>
Students tested	34	31	20	5969
Average Scale Score	2538	2493	2456	2522
Proficiency Cut Score	2552	2552	2552	2552
Proficient with Distinction	23%	0%	0%	17%
Proficient	23%	16%	10%	23%
Partially Proficient	26%	51%	40%	32%
Substantially Below Prof.	26%	32%	50%	26%
Total Proficient and Above	47%	16%	10%	40%
Total Below Proficient	52%	83%	90%	59%

Blue Mountain, Oxbow SBAC Results 2016

GRADE 7 - ELA	Oxbow	BMU	<u>State</u>
Students tested	43	23	5835
Average Scale Score	2513	2531	2562
Proficiency Cut Score	2552	2552	2552
Proficient with Distinction	4%	4%	19%
Proficient	30%	30%	38%
Partially Proficient	30%	43%	21%
Substantially Below Prof.	34%	21%	20%
Total Proficient and Above	34%	34%	57%
Total Below Proficient	65%	65%	42%

GRADE 7 - MATH	Oxbow	BMU	<u>State</u>
Students tested	43	23	5845
Average Scale Score	2501	2498	2548
Proficiency Cut Score	2567	2567	2567
Proficient with Distinction	4%	4%	19%
Proficient	18%	13%	26%
Partially Proficient	39%	34%	29%
Substantially Below Prof.	37%	47%	24%
Total Proficient and Above	23%	17%	46%
Total Below Proficient	76%	82%	53%

GRADE 8- ELA	Oxbow	BMU	<u>State</u>
Students tested	39	29	5916
Average Scale Score	2511	2526	2580
Proficiency Cut Score	2567	2567	2567
Proficient with Distinction	2%	6%	19%
Proficient	23%	34%	39%
Partially Proficient	38%	13%	23%
Substantially Below Prof.	35%	44%	18%
Total Proficient and Above	25%	41%	58%
Total Below Proficient	74%	58%	41%

GRADE 8 - MATH	Oxbow	BMU	<u>State</u>
Students tested	39	29	5913
Average Scale Score	2500	2504	2564
Proficiency Cut Score	2586	2586	2586
Proficient with Distinction	5%	3%	23%
Proficient	12%	17%	20%
Partially Proficient	38%	27%	26%
Substantially Below Prof.	43%	51%	29%
Total Proficient and Above	17%	20%	43%
Total Below Proficient	82%	79%	56%

Blue Mountain, Oxbow SBAC Results 2016

GRADE 11- ELA	Oxbow	BMU	State
Students tested	48	23	5825
Average Scale Score	2569	2566	2598
Proficiency Cut Score	2583	2583	2583
Proficient with Distinction	25%	13%	27%
Proficient	27%	30%	29%
Partially Proficient	18%	30%	21%
Substantially Below Prof.	29%	26%	20%
Total Proficient and Above	52%	43%	57%
Total Below Proficient	47%	56%	42%

GRADE 11- MATH	Oxbow	BMU	State
Students tested	48	23	5829
Average Scale Score	2559	2526	2581
Proficiency Cut Score	2628	2628	2628
Proficient with Distinction	10%	4%	15%
Proficient	22%	13%	22%
Partially Proficient	20%	21%	24%
Substantially Below Prof.	45%	60%	37%
Total Proficient and Above	33%	17%	37%
Total Below Proficient	66%	82%	62%

To: BBNO Act46 Committee
Fr: Wayne Gersen
Dt: November 4, 2016
Re: **Next Steps**

After reading the accompanying memo on BBNO options, it is evident that the next steps for the BBNO Act 46 Committee will be determined by our deliberations at our meeting on November 9, and subsequent independent discussions by the four boards that are engaged in the study. The decisions that each board needs to make are:

Blue Mountain:

- Which of these paths is most acceptable?
- If none are desirable, what options that we might pursue?

Bradford, Newbury, Oxbow:

- Do we want to consider the creation of a K-12 district?
- If so, what other district(s) do we want to merge with to create a preferred governance structure?

Waits River:

- **ASSUMING** Blue Mountain MIGHT be interested in a merger, would we be interested in aligning with them?

I realize from meetings we've convened that there is a sentiment to avoid any further merger discussions and, instead, explore an "alternative governance structure". Doing this would foreclose any opportunity to secure the tax reductions available to districts that do merge and would likely result in a governance structure being imposed by the State Board. The ultimate result of such an imposed merger is difficult to predict. However, given that Bradford and Newbury have identical operating structures it is probable that a merger of those entities would be considered in the development of a State plan.

I understand that Blue Mountain Union has scheduled a retreat to be facilitated by Nicole Mace. At that retreat they intend to review the options on the accompanying memo and any others we generate before that date.

Because there are many unknowns at this juncture, I would recommend suspending the activity of this committee following our meeting on November 9 until we gather the findings from the Boards as outlined above. Once that information is gathered, we can convene to determine if further action is warranted.

To: Blue Mountain-Bradford-Newbury-Oxbow Act46 Committee
Fr: Wayne Gersen
Dt: January 20, 2017
Re: **"New OESU Option"**

Since our last meeting in early November I understand that each of the boards in our study committee and the two other Orange East boards--- Thetford and Waits River-- have engaged in discussions regarding merger options. The BMU board, in addition to convening a retreat on the issue merger options, has also met with the Danville Board and had the Newbury Board in attendance at some of their meetings.

In a conversation with Emilie Knisley and Nicole Mace I learned that one idea discussed by the BMU Board at the retreat Nicole Mace led was the notion of creating a "New OESU" that would consist of the merged BBNO district and the remaining Orange East school districts, Waits River and Thetford. In order to facilitate the creation of such an entity, when they submit their merger proposal to the State Board the BBNO Act 46 Committee would need to express its willingness and/or desire to have the Secretary of Education assign Thetford and Waits River to establish "New Orange East" SU. It is highly unlikely that the State Board or Secretary would make such a decision prospectively, but by including such a signal in the merger submission the committee could get a sense of the viability of such a proposal.

It is evident such a "New Orange East" structure would mitigate the projected tax increases for Bradford and Newbury because the costs of the newly created SU office would be shared by Thetford and Waits River. Earlier this week I asked OESU business officials Keith Merrick and/or Keith Thompson to develop some preliminary cost savings estimates to BBNO based on the assumption that BBNO, Thetford, and Waits River were all part of a single SU. I do not expect to have **hard** figures on this proposal for our meeting on Tuesday, but I hope to have a conservative back-of-the-envelope calculation to help the BBNO Act 46 Committee determine if they want to move in this direction.

Two other developments may have an impact the BBNO merger discussions. First, I understand that SAU 23 approached the Oxbow Board to discuss the possibility of tuitioning its Woodsville students to Oxbow High School at some point in the future. And secondly, OESU Superintendent Beth Cobb announced that she has accepted an appointment in Essex Vermont and will be resigning from her post effective June 30. We may have updates on both of these developments at our meeting on Tuesday.

To the Editor-

It was very disappointing, but not very surprising, to read about the lack of commitment by members of the Orange East Supervisory Board to work together on the state mandate for consolation. As a young teacher new to the area in 1974, I attended some Board meetings and was struck by the consistent struggles of Superintendents Bob Kellogg and John Fontana to find common ground among the nine Boards the comprised OESU at that time. There was still a lot of resentment around the process that led to formation of the two Union schools-Oxbow and Union 36. There were nine different policy books and any attempt to build common language was usually met with angry statements like, "I don't care what works in (Thetford, Fairlee, Bradford, etc.), we have always done it this way and that is the way it will stay!"

Thankfully over the years as various Superintendents and Board members cycled in and out there was less historical anger and a slow movement to build more common practices and policy. However, the overriding perspective in OESU today is still very much firmly based on six individual and very proudly independent schools. At various times over the years there has been some work on trying to build consistent curriculum or systems within the District but there has never been a commitment to work together to improve the learning opportunities for all students in all schools. If the teachers at Thetford Elementary worked two years to build a comprehensive K-6 science curriculum it would not necessarily be adopted by other OESU schools. Rather than build a culture of sharing what is working well in member schools, there is more of a climate of "each to their own".

A few years ago, the Vermont Department of Education recognized that students in Bradford Elementary were being more successful on state assessments than expected. Usually, as the poverty rate of families increased the scores would drop, but at BES the scores increased. When they came to investigate they found the teachers had established a system that was focused on identifying any young learner who was struggling and then developing a plan to better support them. Even though every school in the state was required to have these teams, the dedicated work of the BES staff functioned at a much higher level. Teachers had, on their own, developed weekly meetings after school or before school to focus on reading and other areas to share what worked and brainstorm with each other on how to help young learners become more independent and successful. Parents, the local pediatricians, mental health agencies, and others were included in the meetings to help understand the factors that might be interfering with learning. The communication system within the school that documented the learning profiles of students from Kindergarten through sixth grade was a key component.

The Vermont State Board of Education invited a team of staff to present to them what was working so well for students. They were impressed that the critical component was not an expensive new curriculum but the culture that every child would benefit from the collective wisdom of every member of the school community. Following the publication of the findings several schools from around the state visited BES to talk about what might transfer to their schools. Some staff were invited to other district training sessions to share what worked. There was not a single OESU school that followed up with a formal visit or invitation to share.

At OESU there is no system of sharing successful strategies within schools. Even though each child is involved in formal schooling from Kindergarten through twelfth grade, there is no formally approved K-12 program of study. Each school only looks at their covered span preK-6, preK-8, or 7-12. There is no systemic framework that is committed to provide a

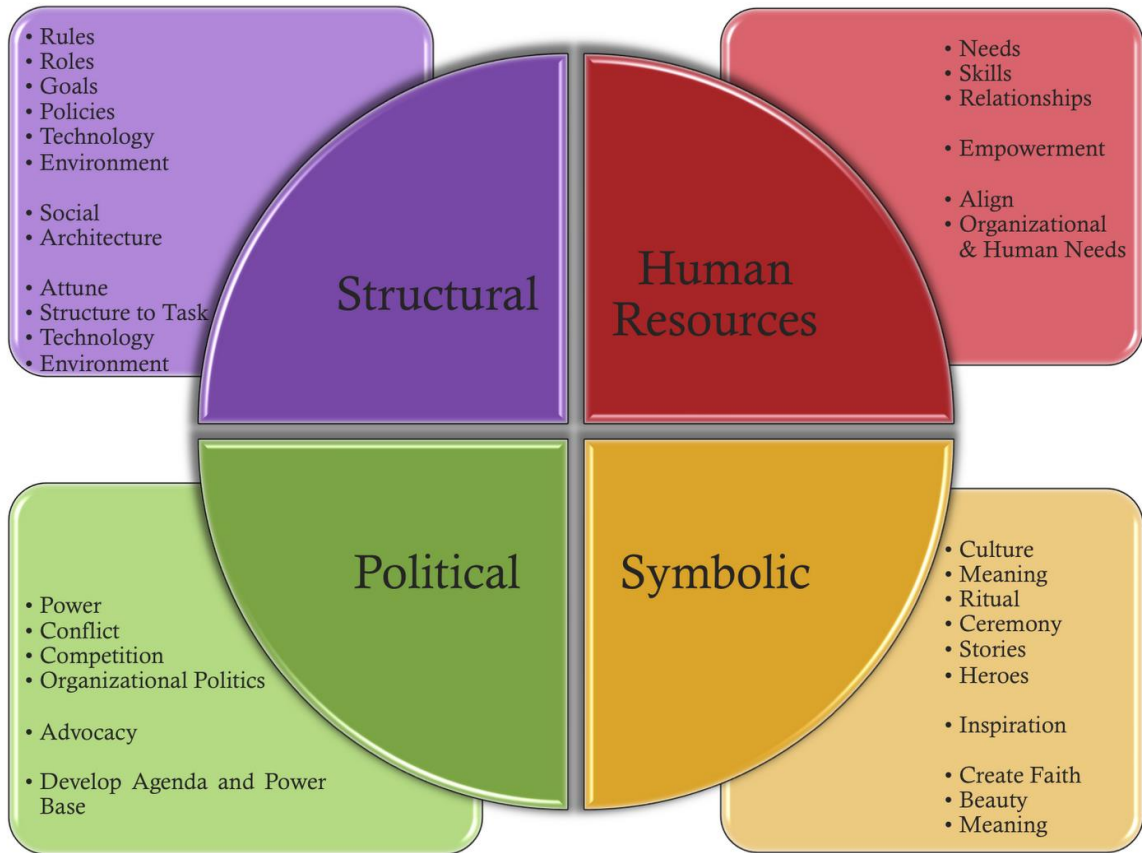
consistent program of instruction. At times Newbury and Bradford Boards have talked about the transition of students from 6th to 7th grade, but there is no policy that requires communication between the independent entities. Seventh grade students and/or parents are not formally asked how the change of schools worked, or more importantly- "How could we make it better?" A few years ago, I asked a freshman teacher at Oxbow how the transition of new students worked, assuming that new students from out of town would be at a disadvantage. She responded that no one had ever asked her, but that Waits River students were more ready for high school than the Oxbow students. There is also no commitment to track graduates after they get their diploma. Seniors declare in April what they plan to do but there is no Board policy to find out how many actually go.

The state has forced schools to look at ways to consolidate services. In systems where there is a shared tradition and collaborative culture of working together to benefit all learners this might not be too dramatic. In OESU it would mean a major commitment to find out how school staff could support each other to improve every opportunity to expand the horizon for every student. Each of our school communities harbors a deep sense of pride for its very existence, and statewide, those communities that have voted to join together have created a formal agreement that acknowledges and respects the individual history and nature of each other. While I don't buy into the notion that bigger is always better or that a consolidation will save me much money, I do believe that my 7-year-old granddaughter will benefit from a system that formally plans for, and respects the fact, that she is on a thirteen year program of public education. Maybe Oxbow, Bradford and Newbury Boards can buck the national trend of "my way is better!", and engage in meaningful dialogue about how working together is more typical of the American way of life.

Yours truly,

Charles Barrett

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