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Opinion: Mergers leading to improved choices and options, greater affordability

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When the towns of Bethel, Rochester and Royalton started to talk about how to move forward under Act 46, one of the first things they did was ask students what they wanted for their high school experience. The answer was loud and clear: more peers, greater depth and breadth of academic opportunities, and more extracurricular activities. Community members wanted the same, but they also worried about affordability.

On April 11, 2017, voters in these three towns will act on a proposal that could give students just that. After a long process of community conversations, the school districts of Rochester, Bethel and Royalton propose to invest in the future of their communities by unifying in a larger, more robust high school, a shared middle school and an outdoor education and environmental program in Rochester focused on preparing students for careers in technical and professional fields. And, they propose to save about \$600 thousand dollars in their first year and every year moving forward as a unified system.

These towns have found a way to keep their schools at the heart of their community while providing a deeper and richer and more equitable set of opportunities for their students in a unified district.

Partnering was a necessity. In these three towns, the average daily membership has been steadily declining since the 1990s. Bethel's student average daily membership declined 33 percent between 1997 and 2015. In Royalton that decline was 40 percent, and in Rochester, 52 percent in the same time period. These communities care deeply about their schools and their children and their towns. And, with so many fewer children, all three schools were struggling to stay innovative and to provide what they felt their children deserved. These changing demographics forced some hard choices about how to invest in a better, more stable future for their communities.

To address their shrinking student population, community members had to have hard conversations about how to provide high-quality, equitable education in their rural communities.

Here is their proposal: In Rochester, Bethel and Royalton, each town will operate K- 5. Middle school students from the three towns will attend the Bethel school for grades 6-8. High School students will attend school in Royalton for 9-12. Rochester's school will become an environmental learning center, providing more opportunities for students within the entire district, especially at the high school level.

As study committee member Geo Honigford stated, the world is changing rapidly outside the school, and what students need to know in order to thrive is changing as well. The unification of the high schools creates all kinds of new opportunities for applied learning and career focused learning, as well as greater breadth and depth of course offerings from which students can choose. In the new unified high school, students from Royalton will have access to 64% more courses than before unification, students from Bethel will see their offerings grow by 140%. Rochester high school students will have access to 311% more academic options in the new system.

Athletes will no longer be wondering whether they will be able to field a team; they will get to choose from more than one sport. One student explained that not everyone wants to play soccer, basketball and baseball, and more sports teams will let more students engage in positive athletic experiences. Other students spoke about wanting an orchestra, a wood working class or experiences in the arts. In the new unified schools, students would be able to choose from a larger portfolio of extracurricular activities, which will engage and challenge students beyond the school day. Middle school students, families and educators are excited about having a new middle school dedicated to just middle school students and a middle school community.

This is not just about Act 46 working; it is about communities coming together to imagine a stronger, more vital future for their children. It is about how communities, when faced with a little adversity, in the words of the district “take a magic paintbrush” and paint a vision of a better educational experience for all children. It is about how a unified community can be greater and stronger than its parts. It is about how family members and educators and community members decided to take some risks in order to create something better.

Make no mistake: this work is challenging. Letting go of the past is hard, even when the future promises to be better. Many brains came together to share ideas, listen to students and community members, and figure out financial models. Sometimes people didn’t agree, and this forced difficult conversations about core commitments and what it means to be a community.

At the end of the day, ingenuity and a lot of elbow grease led to a good plan that offers something better for all. Ultimately, it is up to voters to decide if this is the right plan for their communities and their children. What is exciting, however, is the narrative of hope and agency and optimism study committee members exhibited while presenting their proposal to the State Board of Education. I could not help but feel these communities felt pride and ownership of the vision for their schools, however hard the journey to get to this point.