

September 8, 2021

Re: September Meeting of SBE regarding Financial Separation Agreement and Assignment of Ripton School District for Supervisory Union Services

To: State Board of Education
From: Ripton School District Board

The following letter will address several topics. First, we will update you on the election of our Ripton School District Board. Then, we will share the results of the district vote to approve the financial separation agreement between the Ripton School District and the Addison Central School District. Finally, we will lay out our recommendations regarding the Ripton School District's supervisory union assignment.

On June 30, 2021, three members of the new Ripton School District Board were elected by the townspeople of Ripton. Those members are as follows: Steve Cash, Chair; Molly Witters, Vice Chair; Joanna Doria, Secretary. The new Ripton School Board immediately initiated financial separation negotiations with the ACSD and an agreement was reached with unanimous approval by both boards.

On August 31, 2021, all six neighboring towns in the ACSD voted to certify the financial separation agreement between the ACSD and Ripton School District. Please see the attached summary of votes and the contents of the financial agreement.

With the financial agreement secured, the next step in this process is the State Board of Education's assignment of the Ripton School District to a supervisory union. We believe there is a tenable solution that involves a temporary assignment to the ACSD for SU services with a long-term goal of supervisory solidarity with other independent districts. In the following paragraphs, we will provide you with the thoughts and evidence that lead our decision-making. Our goal is not to take a step backward but rather look toward the future. We hope this dialogue provides the State Board of Education the opportunity to problem-solve about the changing landscape of independent districts and thereby be proactive about accommodating communities that value their local schools.

Looking toward the future, we are excited to share that recent census data pegs Ripton as the fastest-growing town in Addison County. In fact, this year's school enrollment statistics saw a 27% increase in Ripton Elementary School even without an incoming class. With a bright and changing future before us, we also believe that historical context is important. Addison Central and Ripton have had a healthy and functioning relationship for decades. We see Middlebury Union Middle School and Middlebury High School as an extension of our learning community and we hope to preserve that association for years to come. Ripton would have happily remained an active member of ACSD were it not for our town's disenfranchisement in the process of consolidation which negatively impacted our youngest students. Withdrawing was a

last resort to be part of the process and conversation, and we hope that this board understands this.

By statute, our assignment for supervisory services can go one of three ways:

1. The State Board could designate the town school district as its own supervisory district (its own single district SU) if the State Board determines that the town school district "is large enough to support the planning and administrative functions of a supervisory union." There would be one board (elected) and one budget.

OR

2. The State Board could create an SU around the town school district and the UUSD. So there would be three boards – the town school district and the UUSD boards (both elected bodies), and the SU board (an appointed body) – and three budgets.

OR

3. The State Board could allow the UUSD to remain as its own supervisory district (a single district SU) and assign the town school district to a nearby SU by redrawing the boundaries of that other SU.

Based largely on common sense and communications from the legal counsel for the AOE, we narrowed our inquiries to the two most likely: an SU around the town district and the UUSD or reassignment of the town district to a nearby SU. 16 V.S.A § 261 states:

(c) The State Board may designate any school district, including a unified union district, as a supervisory district if it will provide for the education of all resident students in prekindergarten through grade 12 and is large enough to support the planning and administrative functions of a supervisory union.

Although there is no established minimum size for a district to serve as its own supervisory union, we do not believe our district's very small size can support the planning and administrative functions of a supervisory union. An assignment to a stand-alone supervisory district would not be in the best interest of the children of Ripton and would greatly compromise our opportunity for success.

We had hoped to develop a partnership with an existing neighboring supervisory union such as White River Valley or Rutland Northeast. Unfortunately, these partnerships did not come together due to practical concerns about geography and structural capacity. We respect White River Valley's eventual rejection of our overtures and agree with Secretary French that our assignment to their SU would be an imposition at this point. However, we believe there is a practical and creative solution that could involve maintaining a *progressive* relationship with ACSD.

ACSD has institutional knowledge and a long history of working with Ripton; moreover, it serves all of Ripton's 6-12 students. We think there would be a modest amount of additional, remunerable work for ACSD to continue their SU services for the students of Ripton and expect that politics should not disqualify this from being a viable option. We propose a waiver to adjust the membership on the SU board and suggest adding one committee to the ACSD Board. See 16 V.S.A § 261 (d):

(d) Upon application by a supervisory union board, the State Board may waive any requirements of chapter 5 or 7 of this title with respect to the supervisory union board structure, board composition, or board meetings, or the staffing pattern of the supervisory union, if it can be demonstrated that such a waiver will result in efficient and effective operations of the supervisory union; will not result in any disproportionate representation; and is otherwise in the public interest.

Importantly, this assignment need not be a permanent one; Ripton could eventually collaborate as a member of a new SU that includes other independent districts. We encourage the SBE to consider whether the solution to Ripton's supervisory services may also serve as a long-term solution to accommodate the changing landscape of independent districts in Vermont.

At this point, because of our small size, the heavy lift of hiring for SU services from scratch, and the tight timeframe to be operational, we cannot support Ripton being its own SD for the 2022-2023 academic year. In the best interest of our children, we will initially need to rely on some established institutions and be afforded the opportunity of adequate time. We believe we can work collaboratively with the leaders of ACSD while keeping an eye toward novel, long term supervisory structures.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
The Ripton School District Board

Steve Cash
Molly Witters
Joanna Doria