

**Statement for the Vermont State Board of Education, June 15, 2022**

**Sheila Soule, Superintendent of Schools Addison Northwest School District John Stroup, Chair Addison Northwest School District Board**

Thank you for your time today and for allowing us to speak in support of the merger study option underway in ANWSD and MAUSD as well as to confirm our Board's desire to remain a School District. Addison Northwest serves 838 students from the five towns of Addison, Ferrisburgh, Panton, Vergennes, and Waltham. Our district currently operates two K-6 elementary schools; one for students in the town of Ferrisburgh which includes PreK for the district, and Vergennes Elementary School serving K-6 students from the four other towns. The district has a combined middle and high school for students in grades 7-12. In 2010, ANWSU served over 1200 students as compared to the 838 students today- more than a 30% decrease in student population; making budgeting and maintaining programs for students incredibly difficult.

Since our 2017 voluntary merger under Act 46, we have been able to sustain programming while keeping our spending relatively level. The ANWSD total expenditure budget has stayed within 1% of the 2018 budget over the past four budget cycles. Part of the reason for this was consolidating the Addison Central School K-6 students into the Vergennes Union Elementary School; repurposing the ACS building as an alternative education site for the county. Since 2018 we have actually reduced 32 positions, yet despite these reductions, taxes have continued to go up while the expenditure budget remains relatively flat. Meanwhile, the cost of health care, wages, goods, and contracted services (e.g. transportation) continue to climb giving us less money to spend on educational programming. At this time, we have no further options to reduce spending in the district without impacting programs.

Taxes are projected to continue to increase, especially when combined with the impact of the change in weights. We estimate the need to reduce approximately \$5M from the next four 4 budgets to avoid double-digit tax increases. That equates to 40 fewer positions in our district by the year 2026; a 21% decrease in staff from the current staff level. Reductions of this magnitude are not feasible, particularly at the Middle and High schools where we already offer substantially

reduced program options by comparison to larger districts. We need your support to take whatever action is necessary to preserve educational opportunities for our students, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

A merger would provide an opportunity to reduce overhead, especially the Central Office footprint, maintain or even grow programs, and provide economy of scale to bring down per-pupil expenditures. With a merger, we can save a combined 5 million dollars annually while sustaining or even increasing programs for students by eliminating approximately 42 redundant positions (*23 high school teachers, 11 central office positions, and 8 middle school positions*). This proposed future offers significantly more programming, support, and opportunity than an unmerged future, without requiring significant increases in taxes.

Over the past 11 months, the merger study committee has met to learn more about the current state of the two districts. The committee has heard reports on enrollment trends, financials, academic programming, transportation, and the *New Solutions* report done by Nate Levenson. The committee has sought community input on the goals and priorities and used that feedback to craft articles of agreement for a proposed merger. The committee is now preparing to make a final decision on whether to bring these articles forward for a vote. Ultimately, a merger may not move forward but given the information above, our communities should be allowed to consider this option. Deconstructing MAUSD or the ANWSD as districts and reforming either as Supervisory Unions will not allow this process to continue. We believe this State Board action would set a precedent igniting small dissatisfied towns to seek withdrawal and dissolution of their school districts undermining the progress we have made as a state toward greater equity and efficiency.

Accordingly, the ANWSD's preferred structure is that of a Supervisory District, as opposed to a Supervisory Union structure. This provides the greatest opportunity to use staff flexibly resulting in greater equity and efficiency. A single organizational structure results in a coherent system of teaching and learning PreK-12 and provides greater focus on outcomes for learners and cost-efficiency for our taxpayers.