

**David Major Presentation to Vermont State Board of Education
In Support of Westminster's Request to Withdraw from WNUESD
April 21, 2021**

Chairman Carroll and members of the Vermont State Board of Education:

My name is David Major. I have been asked to serve as the spokesperson for the town of Westminster's request to withdraw from the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District (WNUESD). I am a life-long resident of Westminster, and served for many years as a member, and chair, of the Westminster town school board. I resigned from that role when Westminster was merged with Athens and Grafton in 2018 and have not served on the school board since that time. I have, however, served as one of the Town of Westminster's advisors to the Union school board, appointed by Westminster's electors at town meeting. I currently serve as the town moderator for the town of Westminster, recently elected to that role. I should note that I am giving this presentation as a volunteer, and that I have no particular elected or appointed authority to make this presentation. I do wish to thank all the school officials who helped gather the information to follow, as well as the information in the accompanying letters.

As you know, voters in the towns of Athens, Grafton and Westminster have consistently and overwhelmingly voted against merger. Most recently, in January of 2021, Westminster's electorate voted to withdraw from the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District. In March, electors in Athens and Grafton voted to approve Westminster's request to withdraw. That brings us to our presentation today.

In the period since the merger which created the WNUESD, the appointed and elected members of that school board have worked to serve *all* of the students in the union district, regardless of their town of residence. They have worked in good faith to find the efficiencies and other benefits that were intended. With all of their good willed collaboration, and deep commitment to the guiding principles intended by Act 46, those efficiencies, including cost savings, have not been found.

Importantly, there is no evidence that the children who are served by the union school district have suffered in terms of the quality of their education as a result of the merger. Equally so, there is no evidence that the merger enhanced the quality of education and related services to the children in our schools. Further, there is no evidence that Westminster's withdrawal from the union school district will harm students in any of the three towns. I will provide detail to support that statement, which leads to the basic test you will be considering: That is, that "the students in the withdrawing member will attend a school that is in compliance with the rules adopted by the Board pertaining to educational programs."

Supervisory Union. Westminster is part of the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union (WNESU). The town is currently represented in the WNESU by the union school board, and anticipates returning to its representation via a Westminster town school board once again. For more than 50 years, the towns in the WNESU have cooperatively run the Bellows Falls Union High School. The WNESU is made up of the towns of Rockingham, which includes the villages of Bellows Falls and Saxtons River; Westminster, Grafton and Athens. Westminster is the second largest town in the Supervisory Union with approximately 3500 residents and more than 2500 registered voters. Ours is a cohesive supervisory

union with strong leadership, dedicated teachers and staff. Westminster welcomes its renewed and continued active involvement with all of the school boards in our supervisory union.

SU Led Professional Development. All professional development for educators in our towns, including Westminster, is coordinated through the WNESU. We also have a coordinated, comprehensive Continuous Improvement Plan, helping to enhance the overall equity and quality of education provided to students throughout the SU, and therefore helping to achieve the goals of Act 46 in terms of educational quality, equity and opportunity.

SU Wide Coordinated Services. Special Education, Transportation, and Food Services are all coordinated through the supervisory union as well. Our supervisory-union-wide food services program was created in Westminster several years ago, and then adopted more recently throughout the supervisory union in order to increase efficiencies while substantially improving the quality of the food provided our children and families, with a heavy emphasis on locally grown fresh foods and produce. It is a cost-effective and highly successful program, considered a model, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, where, with the help of federal funds which were successfully obtained, an average of 23,000 student meals per month were providing during the period from April 2020 to April 2021, totalling 276,586 breakfasts and lunches to children and youth 18 years of age and younger.

Grants. The WNESU is reported to be the third highest recipient of federal grant funds in the state of Vermont from the CARES and ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds. Separately, Westminster has been among those most successful in obtaining grant funds to create and support pre-school and after school programs, gardening, literacy and other enrichment programs and also serves as the site for serving children with intensive needs throughout the supervisory union.

Standardized Test Scores. Students throughout the SU tend to score at or above grade level in standardized tests, and Westminster scores as well as or better than the other elementary schools in our SU. According to the Vermont Agency of Education Annual School Snapshot data, results of the VT Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium show that in 2019 (there was no SBAC given in 2020 due to COVID restrictions) Westminster Center School meets expected current performance and excelled in performance growth in Academic Proficiency.

Parental Involvement and Community Engagement. Westminster voters consistently vote to approve school budgets. Though parental and community involvement in school activities has diminished somewhat during the past two years under the union school district, we anticipate increasing that active involvement once again. One manifestation of increased involvement will be with the fact that a discussion and vote on school matters and the school budget will be returned to the town's annual meeting, rather than in a special and stand-alone meeting of the voters of the three towns. Historically, school issues bring out the voters. Fund-raising activities and volunteers in the school will be increased and coordinated more easily once again on a local basis.

School Leadership and Retention of Staff. Westminster's elementary school principal is an experienced educator, now in her second year as Westminster's principal. A recent 360 assessment found her with outstanding evaluations. The faculty and staff at the Westminster school have been stable for years, with a healthy mix of long-time and younger teachers.

In sum, we believe you can be assured with confidence that a Westminster town school board and its school will meet or exceed the requirements for compliance with the rules adopted by the state board of education.

I will be happy to respond to questions, either myself or by calling on the SU, WNUESD or other Westminster residents in attendance.

*Submitted by David Major, Vermont Shepherd, 281 Patch Farm Road, Westminster West, VT 05346
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