

State Board of Education Ripton Status Report Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Meeting Place: Virtual Teams Meeting/Video/Teleconference

Date: July 22, 2022

Present

State Board of Education (SBE) Subcommittee Members: Oliver Olsen, Kim Gleason, Tammy Kolbe, Jenna O'Farrell, Lyle Jepson

Agency of Education (AOE): Secretary Dan French, Maureen Gaidys, Donna Russo-Savage, Ron Ryan

Others: Brittany Gilman, Tim O'Leary, Steve Cash, Dylan Patrick, Ron Ryan, Jay Nichols, Jane Phinney, Jeff Valance, Molly Witters, Wendy Harlin, Joanna Doria, Robert Lurie, Marcy Webster.

Call to Order, Amendments to the Agenda

Oliver Olsen called the meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. There were no amendments to the agenda.

Initial Discussion

Tammy Kolby requested a review of the charge of the Ripton Status Report Committee. Chair of the committee, Oliver Olsen, reviewed the charge.

Status Report Presentation by Ripton

Steve Cash introduced the individuals who provided consultant services to Ripton and their availability during the meeting to provide input. He acknowledged that the district was not viable as a stand-alone district, which is noted in the report. Therefore, as part of their proposal, Ripton is recommending the creation of Mountain Supervisory Union, a joint venture between Ripton and Lincoln.

Brittany Gilman, financial consultant, reviewed the budget and provided input based upon questions from committee members. Projected revenues and expenditures were reviewed from documents provided in advance of the meeting. Ms. Gilman suggested that providing a clear budget, in the absence of a district governance structure, hindered her ability to provide concrete transition/unification costs and budget for FY23 and FY24. Therefore, she offered projections based upon the current year's budget and her best judgement estimates given the proposed model. Topics of discussion included staffing, facility needs, tuition of secondary students, career and technical education costs, transportation (route efficiencies), etc. Conversations with Addison Central School District (ACSD) regarding bussing are taking place.

Oliver Olsen requested a tax rate be provided, using the current assessment and projected future budget.

Tim O'Leary, volunteer consultant, provided input on curriculum design, and staffing. Mr. O'Leary is a resident of Ripton and parent. He outlined his experience. In his professional opinion, he believes Ripton is well prepared to provide quality educational services. Regarding delivery of those services, he believes that the Ripton District is on track to meet Education Quality Standards (EQS) standards within the targeted timeframe (July 1, 2023) due to efficiencies, flexibility, personalization, school and community culture, and significant community support. Mr. O'Leary outlined his belief that each of the following areas would be enhanced by a stand-alone district.

- Curriculum design and coordination
- Act 173 multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)
- Desirability for staff to work within the district and ability to find staff

Mr. O'Leary believes that the Ripton Board is passionate about making the plan come to life.

Tammy Kolbe requested specific information regarding how delivery of services would be organized, resourced, and delivered. Specifically, she asked if services would be delivered by itinerant staff and how services might be shared with Lincoln. Mr. O'Leary pointed out that his role in drafting the report had been conversational in nature and that he had offered his feelings as a parent and knowledge as a professional educator concerning the benefits of a small school.

Tammy Kolbe asked if written protocols and plans exist, and if so, were they available for the committee to review. Mr. O'Leary pointed out that he was not involved in creating any protocols or plans as outlined in the report. Mr. Cash pointed out that MTSS and curriculum topics should be directed to Joanna Doria.

Ms. Doria respond to Jenna O'Farrell's specific question about how special education services will be delivered and who will deliver them. Ms. Doria indicated that the needs of students must be identified before a staffing pattern and delivery structure can be created. Staffing has been added to the budget in anticipation of needs. Ms. Doria has access to and can review the IEPs PreK to grade 12. The Ripton District is committed to the transition process and to providing all services necessary. It is anticipated that it will be feasible to maintain all necessary services following the transition due to the flexibility of the MTSS model. Occupational Therapy (OT), Physical Therapy (PT), and Speech and Language Therapy (SLP) tier-three interventions can be provided, potentially by way of remote delivery.

Tammy Kolbe inquired about the services that are currently available and how each will be delivered, specifically in quality of delivery and potentially in collaboration with Lincoln. She also wanted to know what individual or team was developing the plan for delivery. As a follow up, Oliver Olsen asked about specific timelines for completing the planning process. Ms. Doria indicated that those conversations are ongoing. Tammy Kolbe requested more specific information on who is working on the process, the dates, and timelines. She added that joint planning with Lincoln needs to be described and provided, primarily because a supervisory union that does not yet exist appears to be relied upon to deliver services.

Jenna O'Farrell asked for information on how all interventions, including early interventions will be provided.

Mr. Cash pointed out that in an unofficial capacity a volunteer is providing special education planning. No one is currently under contract to specifically address the above noted requests. A current employee is supporting the process. Mr. Cash acknowledged that more work needs to be done in this area. In response to the question about a new supervisory union delivering services, Mr. Cash pointed out that there will be a need for a consultant to oversee a collaboration/partnership between Ripton and Lincoln. He pointed out that today's meeting is a status report, and they will respond to the questions asked by the SBE committee. Tammy Kolbe reiterated the need for follow up information on the process that will be followed for a collaboration between Ripton and Lincoln.

Dylan Patrick, principal author of the report, is the founder of Holistic Impact Foundation Consulting, a New Hampshire based nonprofit that provides educational research and consultancy to help enrich communities, specifically rural communities. His organization is involved in research, not specifically in Vermont. Since November of 2021, Mr. Patrick has been supporting Ripton. Mr. Patrick is committed to building infrastructure that supports schools like Ripton. He has been engaged as a professional researcher and writer as part of preparing the status report. Mr. Patrick explained that the report is not the "definitive outcome" of Ripton's efforts. It is a status report. He believes that the Ripton Board has prepared a good initial report and that it will be the basis for continued work.

Oliver Olsen pointed out that, in his opinion, the report is aspirational and does not specify the actions that need to be taken and the deadlines that will be required for success.

Mr. Patrick believes that consistent and ongoing communication between the Ripton School Board and the SBE committee is essential.

Conversation transitioned to how the proposed work and potential creation of a new supervisory union (Mountain SU) would be financed. Mr. Cash suggested that Ripton is currently exploring the option to request funding from the Legislature as part of the process to bridge a transition. Based upon this suggestion, Oliver Olsen asked for more information about the public approval timeline for any proposed budgets, what funding was currently available, and how it was being levied. "How is the planning funding being provided to the Ripton School Board by the Town?" Tammy Kolbe asked if there was a plan for sharing expenses with Lincoln, given the fact that the Town of Lincoln is a presumed partner as outlined in the report.

Mr. Cash indicated that he would connect with the Ripton Town Clerk regarding the phase one budget. He explained that once there is clarity on the mechanism for delivery of services, then the dates for approaching the voters will be determined. A potential Legislative appropriation may be included in the mix. Two other mechanisms, a town vote on a one-time appropriation and school board borrowing, are also being explored.

Tammy Kolbe requested a timeline that outlines the plan for securing funds to help Ripton get to their July 1, 2023, launch. Mr. Cash indicated that he would return to the committee with a timeline. Mr. Cash will approach Lincoln to determine their participation in helping to fund Lincoln's part of the planning and transition process. Mr. Cash pointed out that Jeanne Albert is working on Lincoln's budget development, and it is being shared with Brittany Gilman.

Oliver Olsen brought up an apparent conflict within the report that suggests that parent petitions for student attendance outside the Ripton School District would be supported by the Ripton School Board. He suggested that this would have significant budgetary implications and should be carefully reviewed.

Kim Gleason reiterated a previous concern when she asked about whether the budget for supporting the transition will be sufficient for the Ripton School Board to develop a successful plan. She indicated that she clearly heard that a current employee in special education is not yet prepared to take on the time necessary to fully vet a transition and delivery plan for special education services.

Jeff Valence spoke next. He is a consultant from NH, who has experience in school administration and is a staff member at an independent school in Lyme, NH. Mr. Valence pointed out that he is not licensed as a Vermont educator and has not taught in Vermont. He has 30+ years of experience in independent/private schools in NH. Currently he works supporting a K-8 school. His involvement has been recent and limited. Mr. Valence pointed out that he has focused on educational process and the questions that Ripton needs to answer. He considers his role to be one of “sounding board” for the viability of the instructional model, and administrative structure and staffing necessary for a small district to be sustainable. He has experience in the advantages offered by a small community school. Mr. Valence indicated that he does not have experience in constructing a process for the creation of a new school district in Vermont, yet he hopes that it can be accomplished given the commitment of the Town of Ripton and their desire to deliver education to their students. He hopes that an effective road map can be created.

Tammy Kolbe pointed out that the SBE committee understands the value of community schools. As part of this, Education Quality Standards are required of any school district, and must be included in the development of a new district. Mr. Valence indicated that he has provided general input and information on the viability for maintaining superintendents in small districts, but he has not been involved in the details or the requirements of delivery required of the Vermont Educational Quality Standards.

Public to be Heard

Molly Witters, Vice-Chair of the Ripton School Board, recapped her understanding of the process and desires of the Town. The Town wants to keep the school open. They have not felt supported by the Agency of Education or the State Board of Education with the process or with their negotiations with ACSU. Ms. Witters feels that it has been contentious. She wants the conversation to be about how to work with small schools, how to keep them open, and how to provide support for districts that are striving to do so. Ripton School Board wants to be empowered to keep their school open. They want support and not adversarial interactions or relationships. She would like help in finding the professionals who can work with them on a path to keep their school open. Ms. Witters read the SBE’s statement on how important education is to Vermont and she feels that the State Board of Education needs to support them.

Oliver Olsen recognized Ms. Witters passion and goals. He indicated that the SBE is not a mediator. It is not within the SBE’s authority to do so. The SBE is a neutral arbiter.

Joanna Doria pointed out that Ripton is a Title I town with over 35% of the students living in poverty.

Adjournment

A motion was made by Kim Gleason to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Tammy Kolbe. The meeting was adjourned at 10:28 a.m.

Minutes prepared by Lyle Jepson.

