

Vermont Principals' Association

Supporting Leaders & Learners

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RIPTON STATUS REPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Ripton as a stand-alone district:

It is my professional opinion that Ripton should not exist as an independent school district. As the Board Chair indicated in discussion with the State Board of Education on July 22, 2022 it does not appear to be viable for Ripton to be its own school district independent of larger governance support structure (i.e. Supervisory Union)

Mountain Supervisory Union Concept (MSU):

This concept is much more malleable to me. Under the plan Lincoln would join Ripton in formulating a new Supervisory Union construct (State Board approval required). I would estimate that this new SU would provide education directly for approximately 125 students (K-5 Ripton, K-6 Lincoln) while providing tuition for all preK students and students in grades operated above the fifth grade in Ripton and sixth grade in Lincoln. It is important to note that there would be no economy of scale support in terms of tuition as both Ripton and Lincoln would be independent school districts within the newly created SU – thus responsible for paying the full tuition amount of any resident students at grade levels for which they do not operate.

The only Vermont Supervisory Union comparable in size would be Essex North which operates a Prek-12 school in Canaan and tuitions students from a dozen or so small towns that do not operate schools. The Canaan Schools have just over 200 students.

A more appropriate metric is probably the Grand Isle Supervisory Union (GISU) which is made up of four operating schools of four slightly different configurations (PreK-6, K-6, PreK-8, and K-8). GISU serves approximately 500 students directly – four times the amount of the proposed Mountain Supervisory Union. Additionally, GISU's smallest towns (Isle La Motte and North Hero) have merged into a district with the town of Grand Isle while Alburg (180 students) and South Hero (130 students) still maintain their own schools/school districts.

The following are considerations/questions, I feel the State Board should examine if they are inclined to endorse a supervisory union comprising Lincoln and Ripton:

- Is Lincoln also committed to establishing a functional Supervisory Union with Ripton? If so, what is the clear demonstration of that commitment?
- What is the feasibility of keeping Central Office personnel in such a small Supervisory Union?
 - Securing an individual that could serve as special education director and superintendent of schools at the same time would be difficult and would likely make it hard to retain that position
- In the report on page 5 it states, " If, at any time, the board determines withdrawal and establishment of the Mountain SU compromises the education of students, they will take necessary steps to re-engage ACSD or accept whatever assignment the state mandates." What metrics will they use to determine if the education of the students is being compromised?
- The report mentions divides with ACSD. What is the substance of those divides? Does moving to a Supervisory Union with Lincoln address those issues?
- The report indicates that many experts support the RSD plan but are not willing to publicly state their support because of the political nature of the issue. Any expert who isn't willing to publicly state their position on the RSD plan to become the Mountain Supervisory Union has no merit from my perspective. Experts can disagree, but to give anonymous expert support for a concept is no different than no support whatsoever.
- Have Lincoln voters approved the \$35,000 Transition Budget?
- Where are the funds coming for the \$35,000 Ripton Transition Budget?
- What is the contingency plan should several high school tuition-age students move into Ripton that the school district would need to pay tuition on? Unless there is some type of fund or revenue source, would the plan be to cut from elementary programming?
- What is the contingency plan should a high cost special education student move into the district either at the elementary or secondary level. Are there reserve funds to cover a cost such as this? Again, I worry about potential jeopardy to elementary programming.
- Will the custodian of Ripton Elementary also serve as the physical plant/facilities expert? What plan exists for the deferred maintenance issues at the school? What financial reserves (if any) or other funding sources are intended to address these deferred maintenance issues. I worry that the Business Manager and the Facilities Manager being the same person will be inadequate. Most Business/Finance Managers have a 20,000 foot understanding of building maintenance etc. but are unlikely to understand the specifics such as a person who serves as a Facilities Manager. The skillsets are very different.
- Who will supervise/evaluate non-teaching staff if the principal's role in this will be minimized?
- The report states that the average teacher tenure of Ripton Elementary School is 20 years plus. That is fantastic. The only concern/question I might have in regards to hiring new staff is are they likely to join the MSU when they can join unified districts in the area that will provide them with greater job security in the event of reductions in force?

- It appears that the principal will also be either a teacher or some other position making sure that the individual is onsite all of the time. This is a good idea as there should always be an administrator in the case of a crisis that can respond appropriately.
- It will be very difficult to keep the parttime positions the report envisions for the new SU: part time Finance Manager, Guidance Counselor, Librarian, Nurse, Art Teacher, PE Teacher, and Music Teacher. Hiring patterns across the state continually indicate that part time teaching professionals look for full time teaching positions. Some of these positions might be able to be combined but the specificity of the positions will make that difficult.
- Should a SU come to fruition, the plan on how best to develop new collectively bargained agreements has lots of merit. It is important to note that the new Board will have to “negotiate” with their new employees.
- The policy work as outlined in the report is very doable using model policies and the policies of ACSD as a framework/template.
- In food service, the use of volunteers is not usually anywhere near as effective as employees. Having ACSD make the meals and have them delivered to Ripton is fine but I wonder what is the incentive for ACSD continuing to do that when RSD will no longer be a part of ACSD’s school district?
- Any transportation plan that potentially relies on parents to bring students to and from school that are not their own children is a bad idea from my perspective. I worry about the new district/SU opening itself up to potential liability concerns. The safest transportation to and from school by far is by school bus.

I also have small questions about policy, curriculum design, and special education programming but believe RSD/MSU has plans in place that could work in regard to these. I’m less worried about policy and curriculum design. I am worried about Special Education services and oversight both instructionally and financially in managing the special education programming.

Knowing what I know at this point, I would recommend the State Board not support the development of the Mountain Supervisory Union without a lot of satisfactory answers to questions I have posed above as well as answers to the questions that State Board members asked Ripton representatives at their recent mtg. with the State Board.

Respectfully submitted,



Jay Nichols