

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Governance Team

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education find that the proposed unified union school district formed by three member districts of the **WHITE RIVER VALLEY SUPERVISORY UNION (WRVSU)** is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts,” and will the State Board therefore vote to approve the attached report of the **WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee (Study Committee)** and to assign the new district, if approved, to the WCSU?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- 1. That the State Board of Education finds that the proposed formation of a new unified union school district by three member districts of the WRVSU, to be named the WHITE RIVER UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c(b).**
- 2. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the attached report of the WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee.**
- 3. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the assignment of the new unified union school district, if approved, to the WRVSU for administrative, supervisory, and transitional services pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706h beginning on the date on which the district becomes a legal entity pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706g.**

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 706c; Act 46 of 2015; Act 153 of 2010, Secs. 2-4, as amended; Act 156 (2012), Sec. 15, as amended

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I. General

The WRVSU consists of ten town school districts with five distinct models of governance:

- Four town school districts, each of which operates a school offering PK/K-12 (Bethel; Chelsea; Rochester; Royalton)
- One town school district that operates a school offering education through Grade 8 and pays tuition for Grades 9-12 (Tunbridge)
- One town school district that operates a school offering education through Grade 8 and designates an approved independent school as its public school for Grades 9-12 pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 827 (Strafford)
- Two town school districts, both of which operate a school offering education through Grade 6 and pay tuition for Grades 7-12 (Sharon; Stockbridge)
- Two town school districts that pay tuition for all grades (Granville; Hancock)

Until recently, the districts in the WRVSU were members of two distinct supervisory unions. At the request of the State Board, the ten districts began the process of merging into a single SU in 2014, which included creating a guiding educational vision for the region.¹ As described in the over-arching, combined report of the three WRVSU study committees, the vision document made clear that:

the creation of the new supervisory union is not simply about merging business functions or the changing of boundaries; rather it is building a foundational structure that will:

- *Allow for the creation of an exceptional education experience for all children in the White River Valley.*
- *Ensure strong leadership to support the education program throughout the region.*
- *Achieve immediate efficiencies and create the potential for greater cost-effectiveness over time.*

The State Board approved the merger of the two SUs into the WRVSU in January 2015. Prior to assuming full responsibilities as the WRVSU in July 2016, the member districts conducted a strategic planning process for the delivery of education in the region. The process involved staff, students, and the community and was assisted by the International Center for Leadership in Education.² The 5-year plan “calls for the creation of a unified high school program for operating towns, strong middle school opportunities for all students, and strengthened, more equitable experiences for elementary students.”

After passage of Act 46, the ten districts created an exploratory committee³ to examine options available to them. Based upon the work of the exploratory committee, the districts formed three formal study committees under 16 V.S.A. § 706 to develop proposals to create:

- A PK-12 Unified Union School District (UUSD) that operates all grades (formal study committee members: Bethel; Chelsea; Rochester; Royalton)
- A PK-12 UUSD that operates grades through either Grade 6 or Grade 8 and pays tuition for all other grades (formal members: Sharon; Stockbridge; Strafford; Tunbridge)
- A PK-12 UUSD that pays tuition for all grades (formal members: Granville; Hancock)

During deliberations, the Sharon, Stockbridge, and Strafford districts concluded that issues of “topography, historic connections, and operating/tuitioning/designation practices” made it inadvisable to join with other districts to create a union school district at this time. As a result, the districts will prepare and submit a proposal to remain as independent town districts after votes on the three WRVSU mergers proposals are final.

The Chelsea members of the PK-12 Operating Study Committee, in consultation with the Chelsea School Board, requested that Chelsea not be included in the proposal to form a PK-12 Operating UUSD. Instead, the Chelsea members participated informally in the Study Committee formed by

¹ See Appendix A – Report on the Proposed Supervisory Union Boundary Change, dated January 6, 2015

² See Appendix B – WRVSU Strategic Plan: Blueprint for Change 2016-2021

³ See Appendix C – Exploratory Committee Report and Recommendation

the Sharon, Stockbridge, Strafford, and Tunbridge districts and has been named in that Committee's proposal as an "advisable" district.

As a result, the districts identified as "necessary" and "advisable" in the three proposals are not always the same districts that served as formal members of the study committee:

- The White River Unified School District (PK-12 operating) – Bethel; Rochester; Royalton
- The First Branch Unified School District (PK-8 operating/9-12 tuitioning) – Tunbridge; Chelsea
- The Granville-Hancock Unified District (PK-12 tuitioning) – Granville; Hancock

II. The White River Unified School District

The WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee proposes the creation of a UUSD that would provide for the PK-12 education of resident students by operating a school or schools offering all grades (New Unified District) beginning on July 1, 2018.

The Study Committee identifies the following school districts as "necessary" to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706b(b)(1): Bethel; Rochester; Royalton.

The Study Committee does not identify any school districts as "advisable" to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 701b(b)(2).

In FY2016, the combined average daily membership (ADM) of the three "necessary" districts was 720.74 (Bethel: 275.49; Rochester: 95.40; and Royalton: 349.85) and the combined ADM of all ten WRVSU districts was 1,690.29. In FY2017, the combined ADM of the three "necessary" districts is 716.13.

The electorate of each "necessary" district will vote on April 11, 2017 whether to approve creation of the New Unified District.

The New Unified District would be created only if the voters in other WRVSU districts approve either or both of the other two proposals (the First Branch Unified School District and the Granville-Hancock Unified District) to form a unified union school district that tuitions some or all grades beginning on July 1, 2018 in a manner that makes the New Unified District eligible for incentives under the "Side-by-Side" program established in Act 156 of 2012, Sec. 15.

The New Unified District, which would be known as the White River Unified School District, would unify three existing PK-12 operating school districts into a single district responsible for operating all schools within the district and would replace all current governing bodies with one unified union school board.

The Study Committee proposes to substantially change the delivery of education to students residing in the three towns. Beginning in the first year of operation, the New Unified District would offer:

- An elementary school offering PK-5 education in each of the three towns
- A single middle school offering Grades 6-8 for the region located in Bethel

- A single high school program offering Grades 9-12 centered in South Royalton
- An outdoor education and environmental program in Rochester to prepare middle/high school students for careers in technical and professional fields

The New Unified District would be governed by a unified school board of nine members, with three members allocated to each town. Members would be elected by the voters of the entire New Unified District.

The proposed Articles require that the New Unified District would design and implement a “strong transportation program which will seek to provide reasonable bus commuting times and facilitate participation in curricular and extracurricular activities.”

An elementary school could not be closed without both (1) a 75% vote of the Unified District School Board and (2) an affirmative vote of the voters residing in the town in which it is located.

If a school building is closed and would no longer be used for the direct delivery of student education programs, then the town in which the school building is located would have the right of first refusal and could purchase the property for \$1.00, provided that the town agreed to use the property for public and community purposes for a minimum of five years. The proposal includes provisions addressing use for these purposes for fewer than five years.

All future votes on the budget, Board membership, and other public questions would be by Australian ballot.

If the voters of Bethel and Royalton approve the proposal on April 11, 2017, but the voters of Rochester do not, then Article 13 includes a process by which the Study Committee could modify the articles, designate Rochester as an “advisable” district, and resubmit the proposal to the voters of the three districts. Article 13 anticipates two different procedures, depending upon whether Rochester voters submit a petition for a revote within the period permitted by 17 V.S.A. § 2661.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: By enacting Act 46, which incorporated the provisions of Act 153 (2010), the General Assembly declared the intention to move the State toward sustainable models of education governance designed to meet the goals set forth in Section 2 of the Act. It was primarily through the lens of those goals that the Secretary has considered whether the Study Committee’s proposal is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c.

The Study Committee reviewed data such as demographics, dropout rates, costs per pupil, and programmatic offerings. “Given the immediate challenges [identified by the Study Committee, including current socioeconomic factors and the small scale of operations, the Committee] sought not only to create a unified governance structure, but also to put before the voters greater detail ... for substantial changes in the delivery of education in this region, beginning in year one, the fall of 2018.”

This is the first proposal presented to the State Board that would require – in the first year of operation – the merger of three disparate middle school and high school programs and the creation of an outdoor experiential, career-focused program for secondary students.

EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee identified a range of potential educational benefits of merger, including:

1. The ability to provide a broader array of programming at the elementary level in such areas as music, world languages, arts, and STEM, but moving staff and programs from building to building.
2. The ability, through a merged middle-school program for all three towns, to respond to students' request for more peer interaction and access to a broader array of curricular offerings.
3. The ability, through a merged high-school program for all three towns, to provide increased availability of world languages, arts, music, athletics, outdoor and hands-on education, and other opportunities.
4. An enhanced opportunity for high school students to gain real-world experience through rigorous place-based opportunities, semester or multi-semester long programs in the outdoor experiential program, and otherwise.
5. Increased stability in and ability to retain high quality staff by combining several part-time positions into one full-time position.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee's report "estimates that savings from the merging of three middle school programs and three high school programs will be approximately \$1 million dollars, driven largely by reductions in FTEs. The new district will likely make \$400,000 in new investments related to the new Rochester-based program and added curricular and extra-curricular offerings, resulting in an estimated net savings of \$600,000."

See also Act 153, as amended, for cost implications to the State.

See the Report at pages 13-24, Attachments A-C, E, & F, and appendices A-C, for a more detailed discussion of educational and fiscal elements of the proposal and *see* the Committee's Worksheet for an overview of those elements in the proposal that address the goals identified by Act 46, Section 2.

The Study Committee's proposal is aligned with the goals of the General Assembly as set forth in Act 46 of 2015 and with the policy underlying the union school district formation statutes as articulated in 16 V.S.A. § 701.

STAFF AVAILABLE:

Donna Russo-Savage, Principal Assistant to the Secretary,
School Governance
Brad James, Education Finance Manager