

**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 two 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 / Tuitioning 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 two member districts of the WRVSU, to be named the FIRST BRANCH 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 / Tuitioning 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 committee<sup>3</sup> 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.

---

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

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B – WRVSU Strategic Plan: Blueprint for Change 2016-2021

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C – Exploratory Committee Report and Recommendation

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 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 First Branch Unified School District**

The WRVSU PK-12 Operating / Tuitioning 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 education through Grade 8 and would pay tuition for students in Grades 9-12 (New Unified District) beginning on July 1, 2018.

The Study Committee identifies the following school district as "necessary" to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706b(b)(1): Tunbridge.

The Study Committee identifies the following school district as "advisable" to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 701b(b)(2): Chelsea.

In FY2016, the combined average daily membership (ADM) of the two districts was 350.00 (Tunbridge: 173.00; Chelsea: 177.00) and the combined ADM of all ten WRVSU districts was 1,690.29.

The electorate of both districts will vote on April 11, 2017 whether to approve creation of the New Unified District.

The New Unified District would be created only if voters in other WRVSU districts approve the WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee's proposal to form a unified union school district that operates all grades beginning on July 1, 2018 (the White River Unified School District) 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 First Branch Unified School District, would merge two existing PK-12 town school districts with disparate operating and tuitioning models – Chelsea, which currently operates a school providing all grades and Tunbridge, which currently operates a school providing education through Grade 8 and pays tuition for Grades 9-12. Unification into the proposed model would require the voters in Chelsea simultaneously to agree to discontinue operating grades 9-12.

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

For at least the initial year of operation, students would attend elementary school (through Grade 5) in the school located in their town of residence. A unified middle school program would begin in the first year of operation.

A currently operating school building could not be closed during the first five years of operation unless approved by the voters of the town in which the building is located. After five years, building closure would require a majority vote of the voters of the New Unified District.

If a building is closed and would no longer be used for public education purposes, 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.

The merger vote and election of initial board members would take place by Australian ballot, as required by statute. All later votes on the budget, board membership, and other public questions would be conducted at an annual or special meeting of the New Unified District pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 562.

**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 observes that the "two communities have a long history of close interaction. The two elementary and middle schools have ... collaborated in fielding sports teams, in the delivery of PK, and in operating the Farm-to-School Program. They have jointly operated a summer day camp for K-5 students, the First Schools Grant, the Fall Exploratorium, and the regional portion of the One Planet Program. ... Over the past two years, the two district boards have been meeting together regularly at the same time and place."

The Committee believes that the biggest hurdle to unification is the fact that the two districts have different education delivery models and proposed merger can occur only if Chelsea voters agree to close their high school. The Committee's report states:

Closing a high school after 100 years is a difficult decision. The Chelsea board and committee members believe that this is the best decision, both for students and for taxpayers. The enrollment at the school has fallen in recent years. Last year, the high school served 48 Chelsea students and 10 tuition students. These small numbers meant that offerings were limited and the cost per student was relatively high. The proposed plan [to provide] for high school education [by paying tuition] addresses both concerns.

## **EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS:**

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

1. Establishment of a unified middle school program that would initially serve 60-70 students in Grades 6-8 with:
  - a. High-energy, hands-on, project based learning
  - b. Expanded curricular offerings and extra-curricular activities
  - c. Larger social peer group and larger class groupings
2. Potential for intra-district elementary school choice that would allow parents to match student needs to offerings or buildings

## **FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:**

The Study Committee identified \$264,000 in cost reductions related to unifying the delivery of middle school and various support functions. It anticipates that there will be a decreased need for part-time staff and that positions can be shared in library, health, athletics, guidance, and other areas.

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

*See* the Report at pages 46-49, Attachments A & B, and appendices A-C, for a more detailed discussion of educational and fiscal elements of the proposal.

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