

# Values, Vision and Unification in Addison Northwest Supervisory Union

## A Vermont Council on Rural Development Report of Findings on

### The Renewal of Public Education For the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Forums

#### Introduction

This report summarizes inputs to the ANWSU Board, the School Boards of the Supervisory Union, and the people of the five communities in the five towns that make up the union: Addison, Ferrisburgh, Panton, Vergennes and Waltham.

In the fall and early winter of 2009 the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) held a series of four forums for residents of the towns that make up the Addison Northwest Supervisory Union. VCRD serves as a neutral convener of public policy at the state level and a facilitator of community development process with local communities. Over the past two years VCRD had led the Council on the Future of Vermont process which had identified the “renewal of public education” as a core priority of the people of Vermont. VCRD had also been participant in discussions on the “transformation of education” with the Department of Education and key stakeholders at the state level. The Board of VCRD determined that it was important that the conversation on the ‘transformation’ in Montpelier be matched by local conversation to ensure that this critical public policy issue was not advanced by a top down formula that was not matched by local discussion and local community leadership.

At the same time the Addison Northwest Supervisory Union was looking at the governance structure for the four schools and five towns in its region and had established a working committee to evaluate the potential to advance district unification with the goal of improving the system and advancing cost efficiency. After hearing of VCRD’s interest and its role as a neutral facilitator of public discussions of this sort, ANWSU contracted with VCRD to produce community forums to consider values and strengths within the schools, to take input on challenges and opportunities around the potential for district unification, and to gather points of vision on the future of school programs. This VCRD report includes the full minutes of the four sessions: first for teachers and staff of the ANWSU (on November 5 at Vergennes Union High School) then for community meetings at the Addison Central School (November 10), Ferrisburgh Central School (November 19) and Vergennes Union High School (December 2).

This report describes what we heard from teachers, parents and interested community members. VCRD was deeply impressed by the passion that people expressed for their local schools, the pride they feel in the good work going forward in the schools today, the commitment that residents have for supporting their schools, and the points of vision that community members share as they look to the challenges of the future and their common interest in producing the best educational opportunity possible for each child in the district.

There are important differences between the schools; for example: The Ferrisburgh Central School is particularly proud of its terrific local foods lunches and the “Farm to School Program.” Addison Central School is especially proud of the warmth of community in the school, and, as the smallest of the

elementary schools, particularly fearful that “unification” could be a step toward consolidating school programs and closing their local school building. Vergennes forum participants were most optimistic in envisioning expanded educational opportunities for shared programs and specialization among the schools that could support all the children in the district.

But ultimately, most of the themes around the ‘renewal of education’ and the potential for unification of the districts came up in each of the forums in one form or another. Although each school and school community is very different, and each community is made up of a diversity of residents with various and sometimes conflicting points of view, VCRD noted key themes that were central to the discussion of values, points of vision and the reported challenges and opportunities around unification in each of the forums. These themes form the core of this report and are grouped by the questions asked in the forums.

VCRD contributes the findings below in support of the democratic decision-making process. The ANWSU Board will release a draft platform for unification in late January. They initiated the forums to be sure to hear from community residents and include their thinking in the draft—we hope the forums and this summary report prove useful to them in their deliberations. In the end, though, VCRD remains neutral as to the results. Residents of the towns of ANWSU know best what will support the progress of their schools and opportunities for their young people. They will have an opportunity to vote on a proposal from the ANWSU Board in March. VCRD commends the hard work of the board, the care and deliberation of the community as they make decisions on the best path forward.

## **I. What do you Value most about your school today?**

***Many of the speakers in the forums approached the values question by pointing to crucial features of their school that they felt were essential and that should be preserved or strengthened at all costs, or which they feared might be lost in district unification. The list below represents the key values that were expressed by residents about their schools. These values point to an impressive and enviable set of school/community assets and document a very positive school climate in the ANWSU schools. They show that the schools and communities of ANWSU go into this discussion from a position of real strength.***

### **Community**

In every forum residents were proud of the tight-knit school community. Some compared the school to a family where children interact like siblings. They want the warmth and care that they see in their schools today protected and enhanced in the future.

### **Scale**

Community members love the small scale of the schools, the fact that teachers and administrators know and pay attention to the needs of each child, and that teachers, administration and board members are accessible to parents and community residents. Parents also come to know each other through the school. This creates invaluable bonds within the school and between the school and community.

### **Student-Centered/Individualized Education**

Residents in ANWSU region were consistent in their praise for the individual attention that children receive, the flexibility that small-scale schools provide in addressing the specialness of each child, valuing the ‘whole child’, and tailoring a program to them.

## **Parent Involvement**

For many residents, being involved in their children’s education, and participating in the school community are major priorities. Some fear that this involvement could be restricted in the future and want the role of the PTA or PTO recognized and parental involvement welcomed and strengthened.

## **Class Size**

Many residents really appreciate the small class sizes in their school and worry that unification may carry a hidden agenda of increasing class size.

## **Personnel and Boards**

Almost universally, speakers praised the exceptional **teaching staff** and the dedicated and accessible **school boards**. Teachers were described as “passionate, committed, enthusiastic, well-educated, good role models” who go beyond the call of duty for the children. People were glad that board members were in the schools and knew firsthand the issues in their schools; they were nervous about losing that direct connection. Teachers praised the quality and creativity of their peers, and administrators talked about how the good reputations of their schools allowed them to attract top quality teachers.

## **Consistency in Curriculum**

Forum participants were proud of the work within all of the schools over the last few years to unify the curriculum so that students from all three elementary schools reach Vergennes H. S. with consistent backgrounds.

## **Creativity**

Several folks testified that the small scale and flexibility of their school, along with innovative teachers and invested parents, leads to a creative learning environment; for many, this culture of creativity and mutual learning was a cornerstone of their vision for the future of their community school.

## **Buildings**

Each school is proud of what it has accomplished to build and improve strong physical plants, grounds, and equipment to serve students and the community.

## **Extra-Curricular Offerings**

Attendees praised the rich variety of programs and extra-curricular offerings that were special in each of the schools, including theatre, music programs, math club, athletics, knitting group, “the Four Winds Nature Program,” Personal Performance Projects, the schoolhouse banking program, reading mentorships, “Kindercamp,” the “toddlers gym,” outdoor classroom, and Student Prevention Association.

## **Quality Services for Children with Special Needs**

In line with values above, residents believe that children with special needs are well integrated in the school community and get the attention and individualized instruction they need to thrive.

## **Results**

In the end, residents, parents, teachers, board members and administrators were most proud of the students—they do well and are well equipped for the world.

## **II. What are the Benefits and Challenges around Unification of Schools in the ANWSU?**

*Each of the sessions shared key themes around this second question. As important as the content of particular challenges and potential benefits listed below, however, forum participants had several clear and consistent messages to their school boards and members of the ANWSU Board. These, along with content findings, are listed below.*

### **Process Recommendations from the Community to the ANWSU Board:**

1. As you approach the issue of unification at the supervisory union level, be completely transparent, open and honest about the pluses and minuses of unification. You will lose trust if you do not present a full perspective on the issues.
2. The community needs to see a clear and explicit accounting of potential financial benefits of the proposed changes to school governance. They need to have time to look at the numbers and consider the costs and benefits of unification. They hope to see an explanation for how existing school bond debts will be handled in the unification plan.

### **Concerns and Opportunities:**

1. Because they don't know what is in the plan, many residents fear that the move to unify the districts also means cutting teachers, larger class sizes, and reduced programs; they need to see a plan for unification that rationally addresses these issues and answers their worst fears.
2. At each forum participants recognized the cost drivers in the educational systems and were concerned about how they could play out long-term. In Addison, for example, some residents worry that reduced student numbers could undermine the viability of the school and fear that their school could be closed. Others see unification as a potential way to draw new children to Addison. While no one can see into the distant future, it is important that the ANWSU answers these concerns as honestly and explicitly as possible to eliminate fears of any hidden agenda.
3. Some residents fear the loss of the sense of family and community in their school. This can be highly emotional for some who see their local school as center of their community. Others describe an opportunity to embrace the larger regional community and point to the success of Vergennes Union High School as a model of a unification that works. The unification plan could describe all the ways that each local school will continue as a center of local community, and detail some of the benefits to students that the larger district can entail. Some worry that unification will undermine the PTA or PTO in their school, weaken the special 'school culture', lessen parental involvement or take away the special extra-curriculars that creative school leaders have put together; local residents and parents need to know how local community involvement and special programs will be enhanced and encouraged by the unification process.
4. Some fear the loss of local control. As residents consider the governance model they are concerned about fair, balanced and equal representation on the new board. Some in Addison call for equal representation; others are concerned about the balance and structure of the board. Some worry about a "narrowing of voice" if fewer people are involved at the board level; others counter that a single centralized board would attract leadership and community

attention and this will lead to greater public interest and involvement. Overall, residents want to be sure that an elected board stays in touch with the local concerns of parents, visits each of the schools, and does not favor the children of one school over another—they need to be able to trust that elected representatives will be absolutely dedicated to provide optimal educational opportunities for each and every child in the unified district, not favor one part or one building over another.

5. Many residents question whether unification will bring more cost effectiveness in itself, or whether it will lead to teacher cuts, reducing curricular coordinators and other leadership positions. They want to know that any cost cutting in the unification process will not undermine school programs or extra-curricular offerings. Others are concerned that unifying may entail bureaucratic costs, higher administration costs or increased costs in the growth of unionized staff—the plan should be designed to allow taxpayers to review these potential costs versus the economic benefits of unification. Many share the goal of one attendee: “How can we save money and also improve the product?”
6. Some question how capital improvements will be paid for fairly across a unified district; they will want to see how capital planning and maintenance are addressed in the plan.
7. Some residents see a great opportunity to be more proactive in sharing services and curricular expertise from one building to another so student experience is enriched and the program become more individualized, more student centered, less room centered, and more stimulating and creative in support of the goals, interest and vocation of each student. They see opportunities to have creative programs in each school available to students with special interests from all schools, and they describe how some schools could specialize and serve as “magnet schools” for certain programs.
8. Some participants voiced the belief that the small classes are not economically sustainable (Vermont has the smallest class sizes in the nation) and believe that over the long-term efficiencies will require integration of classes to reduce the student teacher ratio—this makes those who value small class size nervous about whether reducing teacher ratios could be part of the unification agenda.
9. Some residents point to the fact that the Supervisory Union has already ‘unionized’ several elements to gain efficiencies and believe that there are lots of ways that unification can take these efficiencies further without losing anything at the local level. They point to unifying and streamlining school transportation, and school maintenance and landscaping, as next steps. To them, unionization will spur continual program improvement by making the advance of these efficiencies the normal course of business in the district.
10. Many supporters of unification point to budget growth and tax bills; they share fears that unless the schools work together to build economic and curricular efficiencies, then the escalating costs will come to a tipping point that could have a devastatingly negative effect on each of the school programs.
11. While saving dollars is essential (and needs to be documented in a cost-benefit analysis in the ANWSU platform) most residents want to see specific ways that unification enriches program and expands educational opportunities for children in the union. Beyond their concerns about

losing the great programs that they have, many are excited more about the opportunities in sharing best practices, best programs and leading talents to improve all the schools.

12. Many residents wonder if unification can lead to increased school choice on a limited or district-wide basis. Others are interested in whether there would be a new geographic districting of which students attend which schools, one based less on town boundaries and more on local geography and school capacity.
13. At each forum some attendees testified to a benefit to the community for residents to think forward and build a plan for unification themselves rather than wait for one to be applied to the towns from the state.
14. A few residents don't think that unification planning at the ANSWU goes far enough. They point to the fact that there are 3 Addison County High Schools within 15 miles of each other that could share services, develop complementary specialties and expand efficiencies while enriching student experience.

### **III. Points of Vision for the Future of ANSWU Schools: What will the children of ANWSU need from their schools to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

*Key points of vision were expressed in a variety of ways in each of the forum settings, but most hit on similar themes. The composite list below enumerates the goals and end results that participants put forward for the future of their schools—whether unification proceeds or not. No one voted on this vision or has endorsed every point, but this is what VCRD heard in the process as the key goals and ends that many members of the community would like to achieve.*

#### **Enriched Curriculum through the Creative Sharing of Resources and Skills**

Residents want to see a rich curriculum strong in the basics but also specializing to meet the needs of individual students for arts, languages, critical thinking, creative problem solving in the 'real world'—all of which will be supported by sharing resources and skill sets throughout the supervisory union. To succeed in the future, students need to be independent learners who follow their passions and explore their interests in depth—which means building deeper connection to expertise in the community, more individualized instruction, and connecting students with teacher/specialists and the community beyond their local school. Residents can more directly share their talents and their involvement deepens the connection with the community outside the building—the lines between community and school blur and learning is more fun, exciting, and relevant.

#### **Languages**

Several residents posit the idea that students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be living in a global society unlike any in world history and will need to understand other cultures and communicate with people from other parts of the world more directly than ever before. They pointed to a vision of increasing language offerings through technology and sharing teachers and resources beyond those available in any single school.

#### **The School as Lifelong Learning Center**

The school needs to serve the full community; several residents envision a school open in the evening, a school that encourages adults to take classes, a place that has offerings in technology and workforce skills and that serves the full continuum of learning needs from pre-school to retirement. To some

residents this means that school hours and seasons need to change to get away from the agricultural schedule and use the building year round.

### **Schools as Information and Technology Centers**

To be relevant to modern culture and the economy, schools will have to move more quickly to embrace new digital tools and applications—to learn to teach on screen, to expand curricular specialties beyond each building, and to serve as centers of information transfer and research for the community. Great teachers can reach more students by projecting beyond their physical presence through Internet applications. Technology can connect students and their families in ANWSU with the world.

### **The School is a Strong Creative Community**

No one wants to lose the tremendous sense of community in ANWSU schools. Every child needs the deep sense of belonging that the schools foster today. Many participants in forums shared points of vision around expanding on the wonderful learning environments already in place. They see a future where youth learn from each other, from the community and from teachers throughout the district, where the Internet brings them in contact with global issues, challenges and opportunities, and where the feeling of community in each school is deepened and enriched by the sense of participation in the region, state and world communities.

### **Creative Leadership and Civic Participation**

ANSWU residents want schools to support opportunities for active learners to develop skills and knowledge—but also learn how to learn. To succeed in the future, students will need to be problem solvers, sophisticated in working as teams, experts at finding information and getting to the root of issues, but also informed by the instilled values of their community and an engendered commitment to civic participation. Democracy is never done, and school needs to educate the citizen leaders of the future.

### **School Choice**

Forum Participants shared a variety of passionate positions related to school choice. Some see it as actually choosing which school in the union to attend. Others see a curricular flexibility that allows a middle school aged student to take an on line course in Chinese, attend art and band at another school, and take an evening algebra course in the High School. For them, choice means helping each learner develop a tailored program to meet personal goals.

### **School Performance**

While few forum attendees had complaints about student performance, several envisioned better results in terms of improved proficiencies in math, reading and writing so that graduates have the high level skills they will need. For them, holding a vision for excellence is essential in preparing the next generation to succeed in Addison County, and the world.

### **Local Participation and Leadership**

If unionization occurs, residents want to continue and build on parent and community involvement in the schools and they want to ensure that excellent leadership is elected to represent the interests of and promote the best opportunities possible for every student. Many residents want the local region to define the best governance model and lead, rather than have the state lead to define and impose a structure; but they want to ensure that those elected to represent them and to guide education for the region serve the interest of all and maintain effective and efficient local control for the ANWSU region

# MINUTES OF FORUMS

## Renewal of Public Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century What will it mean for Addison NW Supervisory Union Schools? Forum for Teachers and Staff November 5, 2009 Vergennes Union High School

### What do you value most about your school today?

- Small nature of it, we can respond to a variety of needs and try things that we don't have to sell across a wide spectrum of grades. We can be flexible and pay attention to individual needs of kids.
- We're a community; a family within our own community with close communication amongst ourselves.
- Kids from the 3 sending schools are "our kids" and they fit in to the community immediately. Some of the factors that contribute to that include: each school has a continuing K-12 discussion on reading, writing, math that has been consistent; the principalships have been consistent at 3 of the 4 schools; and there have been consistent roles at the central office facilitating the conversations.
- I love the fact that in this high school, the kids are well known by the staff and there's virtually no anonymity. It's a real community and doesn't have the rigid social lines that other schools have.
- Accessibility is great. My grandson goes here and I don't have a problem contacting any of the teachers or having access to any of the teachers.
- High quality of the people I work with. Intellectual, professional and caring at every level – I haven't seen anything like it anyplace else.
- The culture is one that gives teachers and staff opportunities to explore, to take risks; people here are looking to grow and learn and they personify that notion of being life-long learners. They can implement creative solutions despite the obstacles. It's an organic environment that allows for change.
- Ability of our school to differentiate instruction for kids to tailor to their needs and be able to push them. There's a building community unencumbered by distractions other schools might have. We don't have divisions in the staff or in the town. There's a cohesion and synergy the staff has achieved and can work kid by kid and create a tailored program for them.
- Valuing the person as a whole, the young adults are not just viewed as a generic student. They are people, thinkers, learners going out in the world. That vision is starting to become articulated. Also, teachers are valued as leaders in this building willing to take risks, do, and learn. People are stimulating to work with here.
- Implementation of the curriculum across the supervisory union for K-6 is consistent.
- We take care of our buildings. We make sure they are maintained and aren't letting them fall apart.
- No question about our extra-curricular vehicle for education. We have great theater, athletic teams, music program, math club. Gives us multiple vehicles to celebrate student success. People in the community value that.
- We're respected both within the district and outside the district in Addison County.
- When we open positions and have vacancies, the level of qualifications from candidates is high. We hear again and again that they are applying because they want a job here, not just because it's an opening. Good people want to work here.
- Everyone in the school communities take ownership for all the kids.
- We recently had a guest teacher who said you feel a warmth just walking into the school and the kids seem happy and well taken care of.
- We have great mental health services, there's a school-based clinician – students are in good hands.
- Change is possible here, not that it's easy, but it's possible. There's receptivity here for doing things better, knowing there may be ways to do things



better. Can build critical mass and see positive change happening.

- This district is amazing at offering professional development opportunities – advanced degree programs that are helpful and people can go through programs together making it easier to apply what you learn to everyday teaching.

- Because of the change that's allowed to occur, there is flexibility to have a crazy idea and get backing. Evidence based expectation we are building here, we can show why something works and why it's changing.

## **From your point of view, what are the benefits and challenges to unification of schools in the ANWSU?**

- I don't know what people are thinking about when they say unification. I need to know more about what it looks like to be able to answer the question.
- I don't know what's on the table. I came here to find answers to questions and we don't know why it's happening. Our schoolboards have combined together and haven't informed the schools. We need information about what they are thinking before we can even comment on this.
- Don't know what we're talking about in terms of unification. When I started as reading specialist, I moved around the district to wherever the need was. Now, I'm in one location and I enjoy being based in one place where I can be part of a team, get to know the colleagues to bring about positive change in the kiddos. If unification means we have to move to wherever we are needed I feel like we're going back in time.
- Challenge is that there's a concern that one of the 3 elementary schools might be at risk of closing. One has a few students and the other 2 could take those kids in. It would lead to teacher cuts, larger classroom size, and rifts within the district.
- If Addison closes, our kids who have come to know our community and feel safe there would have to be bussed to other schools. That's not what families are looking for and won't be cost effective.
- Fearful of losing our school community. Financially it will be what they feel they need to do.
- The meeting where our Commissioner, Armando, spoke to Caledonia Union was a scary meeting to the people that were there. The fact is, we're losing kids as a supervisory union and at individual schools. Armando is looking at county-wide supervisory unions. It's the model of unification we have to take a look at and what this one is in particular; not the model the state is putting out. Our district is already very unified around the things we do for the kids. Having performance based graduation requirements has to be a K-12 effort. To become more unified instead of folding to the fear – we have to be proactive and be ahead of the curve. We need these schools to be tightly fit together so we can have a vibrant state once again by training our kids well. As far as details of unification, just need to get on the internet to find them. Let's think about how unification can work positively for us here.
- The issue is one of emotion for people. Their school is their community. The tax payers will bleed themselves to keep local control. Cost effectiveness won't sell it; there are other factors and other questions to answer before you can get there. What will it lead to? A longer school year? If that's what we're talking about then we need to answer other questions, like when will teachers get their training, when will kids make summer job money, when will the building maintenance fit in, etc.
- Unification of the boards is what we're talking about.
- Does unification destroy or keep local control? If boards unify, better make sure the voters feel that it's their board or they won't vote for it.
- A couple years ago, one set of teachers were paid by the district instead of the individual schools. Since that time, they have had to be moved from one school to another. Now a staff person that used to be more involved in my classroom can't be involved in meetings anymore because she has more places she has to be.
- What will happen to the debt that each school has right now? If we become one board, are we one budget? Does Vergennes then have to pay for Ferrisburgh School even though we didn't vote for what they're doing there?
- The whole way the business of education is being done is changing. Currently education is becoming more student-centered, less room-centered, less teacher-centered, more global. Trying to be proactive and at the front of the curve is a huge

challenge. We have a potential to reach out to other educational resources rather than just protecting our own space. We have the potential for providing a greater number of opportunities for students. If it's just here, they will only get here. Unification doesn't have to take away from the community. It gives greater potential to the community and kids in the community. If they want kids to stay in the community then they have to provide them every opportunity they can.

- Nearest paradigm to a unified union is Vergennes Union H.S. because we're serving all 4 communities. We have a model in place and are operating effectively.
- If this is voted in, and later is found not to be successful, could we go back?
- Yes, it happened in Franklin Central – they had 2 shifts and they voted back to the older model.
- Convince a tax payer that my tax money won't leave Vergennes and go to Addison or Ferrisburgh. The unknown is huge. One proposal on the table 5 years ago was that the complexion of all Elementary schools could change to: K-2, 3-4, 5-6.
- How would unification affect the administration and the central office? Would there be fewer principals, fewer curriculum coordinators, fewer teachers. A concern and a question.
- If it makes things cost effective, it could be a benefit and could help us maintain a level of instructional services to kids in the face of a tough economy.
- Passing budgets will be a challenge. There are towns that historically don't pass on the 1<sup>st</sup> go around.
- If we unify our boards, would there be equal representation? Or would there be fewer people representing smaller schools? Let me know how it will be equal and fair to all the schools so each school is given what they need.
- Would like all notes from this session to be made public.
- Have a tendency to read articles about Vergennes. The previous vote on unification was quite close. Would urge that there is complete and utter transparency in this process – getting ideas and facts out there even in draft form will help everyone on all sides of the issue.
- People are worried that there is a hidden agenda, that they are already planning to close schools, and this is just an exercise. Let's see clearly what are the benefits and costs. We need more information on how it would benefit the kids,

teachers, schools. Giving people the details with full transparency would be really good.

- We are educators. It's our job to read and research things. It's not our job to take everything the board tells us verbatim. The paradigm is to be informed and read newspapers. We have to understand the difference between the modest idea of unifying these 5 towns with the model of unification being looked at by the state.
- Because I think of the last time this came in front of the district, the questions that were asked could never be answered because it was a work in progress. The questions were answered and it went to vote without anything concrete. I want to know what it means to my community.
- Challenge of schoolboard to communicate their vision of this unification. I want to know what it means for the long-haul. What does it mean 10, 20 years down the road? They know the demographics, the monetary challenges, so put it out clearly. If it works, and it ain't broke, why fix it? The dollar is pushing this.
- I'm looking for clarity and honesty. I want to know what I'm voting for. Details are important. It wasn't well presented 5 years ago. Every question has an answer somewhere out there. If the groundwork is done correctly and for the right reasons then I don't doubt the community would vote for it. Do something different this time. Do a survey to reach out to a wider community base where people don't have to write their names. Someone has to be at the other end to answer the questions. I don't trust the honesty of the boards. If a budget is passed, things get changed after the community has voted for. Trust is a big thing here. Trust is not at a level, administratively wise, that they think it's at.
- Can the board choose a couple of different forums to notify people so the taxpayers and everyone knows where to look for information? Some people don't have technology so need to pick a few ways to get the information out regularly.
- Part of what I do is mailings at the supervisory union. The board and superintendents office do mailings constantly to inform the voters. Also, schoolboards don't meet during the summer months so there's not an opportunity for them to make any changes.

## **What is your vision for the future of school programs? What will the children of ANWSU need from their schools to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

- With what we now know to be how the learning brain operates in children there is a huge opportunity and challenge to keep up. Today, everything we do in education, 99.9 percent is based on observable behaviors in children. The new cutting-edge curve is to make decisions on how their brains learn. I predict that in 20 years, prescription of learning will be different and based on the fact that every brain learns differently and we'll hone our skills to be able to meet those needs.
- Need to keep the sense of community and belonging.
- No matter what way you teach them, human nature has proved that even though you know something you don't always make rational decisions. You make decisions emotionally. We can teach skills and knowledge, but we have to instill values to use the knowledge to benefit themselves and their community. Need to engender a sense of civic participation.
- A number of veteran teachers have seen curriculum changes over time. As a Kindergarten teacher, potty training and tying shoes wasn't part of my curriculum but it is now.
- Seen huge changes in this school. I was a student here and now a teacher. There have always been good things happening here, but I have seen such improvements based on having a leader that has a vision, people buying into the vision, a great teaching staff, a board that supports the vision. The leeway we're given as educators to take a concept, try it, run with it, get support for every facet. The atmosphere here encourages and supports people to be creative leaders. We will need those things to continue succeeding.
- We will need to continue to hire highly qualified teachers. And to work for all students, keep the student population size low in classes, and seek the highest student achievement possible to help kids be successful.
- Will have to have access to the school. Doesn't make sense to close the building for 3 months of the year. Why shut it down for a couple months? Building should be open for the community to use in some way.
- Impressed by the Walden program which is being watched nationally. It's innovative, highly creative, has a community service piece, kids do mentoring, thinking outside the box. Highly creative, ever changing, flexible, meets needs of diverse population.

# Renewal of Public Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## What will it mean for Addison NW Supervisory Union Schools?

### Public Forum

November 10, 2009

Addison Central School

### What do you value most about your school today?

- It is very community oriented – it's not just a school, it's a community. The PTA does a lot for the students here, with an activity every month: movie night, dinners, book drive. Parents are involved with their children in classrooms. Don't want to lose that. We don't want to be regulated about what we can and can't do. I don't want another school board to tell us what is right for this school.
- I like that it is a small school. All parents and kids know each other. There's real bonding with teachers and principal. It's a well built structure with a great school board, principal, counselors, and awesome secretary.
- Each teacher knows every single child; they really come to understand the children so when a child is having a bad day they can, and do, give hugs.
- I believe we have a culture that is different from any of the others schools in the district. There's a real family feel with local decision-making. I think if we unify we will lose that culture. Don't want to lose our local decision-making. Even without unification I see decisions being made at the supervisory union that affect us.
- We have superior teachers. How do you make that equitable across the district?
- Kids interact as siblings and look out for each other once they hit the high school. They develop closeness here like a tight-knit family which is comforting to them. It's also comforting as a parent knowing you can talk with anyone and they know where you kids should be or should not be.
- The building is welcoming to the community; the Thanksgiving dinner is open to the whole community.
- Each of the 5 school board members has a child in the school. They know what's going on which is important as they make decisions.
- The fact that the local school board members have kids in the school means they know what's going on in the school and the leadership is accessible and accountable. If we unify, parents of other schools won't know what goes on here.
- Discipline problems are very small. The way we run the school makes everyone feel included.
- The academic program we offer is consistent with the outcomes from Ferrisburgh and Vergennes; students hit the ground running when they get to the high school which is not the case with all districts. The 5 towns in this SU work hard to promote that. I've worked all over Northwestern Vermont, ours is a unique supervisory union in that we already have that cohesion as a district. Board and staff have worked hard to be on the same page. That approach attracted me to accept a job here.
- We have a special 6 week independent project called PPP (Personal Performance Projects). Parents are entitled to get involved. The project encourages kids to study something they are passionate about and then present their research to other classes, to parents, and to the community. It provides kids an opportunity to shine. Kids will work harder on things they are passionate about.
- Relocated to Addison because I really like it. The school is the glue that keeps the community together. People get worried with the unknown. As soon as the options are laid out for people we can pull together and determine what's best for the community.
- The school participates in the "4 Winds Nature Program" where trained parent volunteers teach science in the classroom once a month. A lot of the schools don't do it around here. The kids value it and look forward to it. Don't want to lose it.
- People come together for other families. Kids raised almost \$1,000 to bring some local troops home for the holidays.
- Parents are welcome and active in the school. There's an open door for parent input.
- The special needs students that I have known quite well have been well accepted and supported by their classmates.
- Teachers are sensitive to the community when it comes to their approach to education and how they relay world views and values. The community should have a say in that. We're not raising our

kids to be under someone else's study. We want fair representation.

- Kids can advance at their own level individually through the school's approach to teaching reading and math (and are starting this with writing, I

think) where the kids go to the group at their academic level regardless of grade they are in. Everyone is advancing at their level individually. Kids at high levels for their grade aren't as bored.

## **From your point of view, what are the benefits and challenges to unification of schools in the ANWSU?**

- A question: if we do unify, how would the school be represented at town meeting? As it is now, it's hard enough for our full board to answer all the questions of the community.
- What happens to the teachers if we unify? I'm concerned that with unification there are some great teachers that could possibly lose their jobs. Wouldn't want to lose the great teachers or this building.
- Concern for the teachers that might have to split their time between schools. We have an awesome math teacher. I don't want her to split her time between this school and another school.
- Unification may not be more efficient and may not be more economical. Decisions can be made more quickly at local level. When decision-making is moved farther away it's going to be less efficient.
- This school is about families being involved in the education of their children. Concerned that the school will close and with that, lose that connection with the parents.
- Other districts think parents here in Addison are too involved. They may not like us coming in and teaching in the school.
- People are concerned the school will close and worry that people in West Addison, for instance, would have a 19 mile drive to Vergennes. Doing things cooperatively as a district is important but because this is a small town, it scares me that it might lead to our school closing. Addison is half the size of either of the other schools. How could our 2 representatives be effective on our behalf?
- If we unify to one board I fear that we'll unite our elementary schools into one school. It will affect the community. Currently we have enough teachers and helpers in the school to give extra help to those that need it. I fear that inevitably we'll lose the school and community. If I can be guaranteed that we would have an equal number of board member reps as the other schools and that the school wouldn't close then that would be different. We're a farm community. Our children have different outlooks on things. Unification would lead to other things. Don't want our reps to get overruled by the reps from the other schools because we don't have fair representation.
- They can promise us the world and once they gain power they take away our power – that's what we're talking about – taking away our power. This building belongs to the people of Addison. I don't find comfort in people guaranteeing anything, decision-makers can make change.
- Parents are upset right now. Could kids change schools they go to? Could they choose?
- We wouldn't have as much control over the spending that we have now. Currently we can make purchases and decide who we want to hire.
- The more boards interact with other people and get perspective from others it can be beneficial in terms of broadening thought processes. Depends on how the union is set up to equalize input from all facets. Could be a potential benefit.
- Concur that Vergennes and Addison have different demographics. With unification, one could imagine some Pantons families would want to have their kids come here, or maybe even some W. Ferrisburgh kids. It might boost our numbers.
- Unification might allow board members to think outside the box. Running schools is an expensive business. Staffing costs a lot. Unification might allow board members to think about changing programming and staffing to tamp down the cost a little. 75% of people here don't have kids in the school. It's like the frog in the water, the water gets hotter and hotter and eventually you say "Youch". Board members have responsibility to think down the line.
- Ferrisburgh went through recent remodeling. If we unify, are we all responsible to pay for upgrades to other schools? It's bad enough we have to pay so much for our kids to go to the high school. Adding more taxes onto Addison people because Vergennes or Ferrisburgh needs more isn't right.
- Every time you consolidate you need more staff to oversee it. It's already overstaffed and heavy on top. I can see it becoming heavier if they oversee the whole union.

- There's too much micro-managing and regulation of local schools going on already. Concerned that it will even increase.
- Could streamline transportation, currently see Ferrisburgh buses driving through Vergennes and passing kids waiting for their buses, which is not efficient.
- If unification is the answer, then there should be data that shows within other communities that education is better because people are unifying. America has a lot of work do with their education. Look at history as schools became unified and farther away from their local community. Places father away throw down mandates. We should see by now. Arizona has school choice. I would like a discussion and the Addison school board to look at why we continue following a pattern around education in the US that isn't successful. It's wrong if they say we wouldn't lose our culture. There will be mandates like teachers not even being allowed to touch a student – there goes hugging which is part of our culture here.
- Question: When we want to use the facility on weekends or after school for softball practice or birthday parties, would we have to go to that board to get permission to use the facility? Now we can ask one guy with the authority.
- When this auditorium was built it was understood that this was the community's' auditorium. Don't think a unified school board has the right to turn over this part of the building.
- In Addison we pay a premium tax but unification could mean we get below the threshold and see a lower tax bill. Currently when we plan our budget in Addison, we can only figure our cost per pupil on an equalized cost per student. If we unify, the cost would be spread across the whole district which could decrease our tax bill. My fear is that if we don't do something to address the costs, we can't maintain all these good things people are speaking about. If we don't pursue efficiencies we're going to lose programming.
- I don't think most people will continue to support 7, 8, 9% increases in our school budget annually.
- Would like the supervisory union to show the costs and benefits of this.
- Can the supervisory union put some figures together around what we would save or change? We'll save X amount of money. Where are we going to save? What could it look like?
- Want to know people are making an educated decision, not hypothetical. People need best case to worst case scenarios so people can make that decision. It becomes a passionate thing.
- We have a lot of questions; these 3 questions that are being asked today don't answer them for us.
- We want answers. There would have had a better turn out if we knew we'd get information.
- Before an informational meeting they should present literature in front of community so the community knows what they are talking about. Do they have information about what they are thinking about doing? Show me a plan of what they are expecting down the road.
- Biggest challenge is making sure that people have information on the facts and figures so it stops all the "what ifs". Give us clarity and transparency.
- The Chair of the high school board and chair of unification study committee thanked everyone for coming. She noted that this conversation is exactly what they want to hear before they come back to communities with ideas and plans. They want to be proactive, hear concerns, and figure out what the answers are. Their hope is to come out with a platform and return to all towns and do informational forums to address concerns and questions. To pass, this has to go to a vote in each town, and all towns would have to vote yes.
- In our programming, there are district wide mandates that we use certain curriculum. Each school has its challenges. How would we equalize? Would all the schools have a fantastic computer lab like Ferrisburgh? Would all schools have a tremendous music program like Vergennes? Could Addison get something that great? How to address more consistency between the schools.
- A lot of people don't know what "governance" means. Use a different term that people understand. People didn't come out to this meeting maybe because they didn't understand the term.

## What is your vision for the future of school programs? What will the children of ANWSU need from their schools to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

- I think we have it here already. The kids have everything they need. If money wasn't the issue we wouldn't even be talking about all of this.
- The tax payers passed the budget just barely last year. Could have just as easily gone the other way.
- I'm intrigued with Arizona. They have really embraced the idea that we're not doing a great job with education. So they have opened up to school choice. Families can choose certain schools that are known by different world views and values. Vermont is so far behind even though we're known as a progressive state. I have some family going to a Charter school. The openness of children's opinions and how teachers engage them is part of model. They follow Socratic discussion procedures coming from ancient Greece. I'd like to see our schools encourage and engage kids in sharing their opinions. Our children need to be able to express whatever view they have in this day and age and know that other children can hear it and then express their opinion and views.
- Bridport didn't pass their school budget the first time last year. 75% of people here don't have children in the school. Tax payers and voters need to know we are getting value for our dollars with academic proficiencies. I don't think we are now. I want to see proficiencies go up in math, reading and writing. My 4 children have gone through schools. I want to see kids excel, and not just be a family, but be able to move beyond Addison and be well prepared for the world.
- To see child as a whole; that everyone is different. Want to narrow the gap in proficiencies; we strive to do that every day. Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we should be putting more data out to the public so people can see that our kids are doing really good stuff.
- Students need writing and communication help. For 21<sup>st</sup> century, beside teaching basics, we have to help kids develop critical thinking skills and, our math, science and writing has to go up. There's no way we can maintain our student teacher ratio of 10-1 or 11-1 given the costs. The school has to prepare for larger classrooms and at the same time still improve math and reading. How will that be done? It will be essential.
- I have spent time in many school districts. We have a special thing. Our homogeneous population helps, but there's nothing sweeter than raising kids with good values. We're a little on the conservative side here; no need to apologize about that. We need to provide value with outcomes and have to come up with a way of differentiating instruction and expectation that services will be tailored to each kid. My wish for future is that we have fewer distractions, fewer subject areas, less of an obligation that we're going to provide secondary or tertiary programs here. We are struggling to provide 8-10 different programs in this small school. We have all these other things we have to do to keep all constituencies happy. But it comes down to the fact that kids have to come out with really good skills. The essentials are writing, reading, math, and civics. Need to provide technology, warm environment, and conservative community values. We have to allow some other programs to fall by the wayside so we can focus.
- Education needs to be completely renewed, the whole system. The way things are set up now doesn't benefit kids. Traditional path isn't necessarily for everyone. Want to see us tailor to kids aptitudes, help kids learn skills and trades, as has been done throughout history. We are behind in technology; we need more forward thinking around technology. Maybe our school day needs to be longer.
- Agree that we need to give the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Hard to catch up in college if don't have that.
- Children can't write in cursive anymore, they print. Students at the college level can't read cursive either.
- We will need to provide outstanding education for the least amount of money. Would like to see us be proactive and take control rather than wait for people on Montpelier tell us what we're going to look like in 5 or 10 years.
- Would like to see schools give equal time to different theories i.e., evolution is now decided to be the only origin. Who decides what information is taught? Kids need to be able to have open discussions on different ideas.
- Allow teachers more free reign to decide how they structure their day based on what they know about the needs of the children in own class.
- Want each school to have the same number of school board reps if boards unify.
- Wouldn't someone elected to this board care about all the children and look out for the best interest of all children in the district? They would

be broader minded and not just care about kids in certain schools.

- Request that everyone keep an open mind. Have heard a lot of misinformation and assumptions here that I haven't heard yet in our discussions about unification as a board member. I wouldn't dream of favoring Vergennes over Addison. We come to the table with the best of intentions of trying to cut down on costs, making it effective, make it work, keeping Addison open. If we put all of the kids under one umbrella we can address issues such as the fact that there are only 11 kids

coming up in Kindergarten in Addison. We will come up with a plan that addresses everyone's concerns. Please give us respect.

- Would be a good idea to have a special segment at each town's town meeting explaining what this is about.
- If this does happen, would like to see that other school board members from each school visit each of the schools and learn how individual schools are run and how the community interacts.



# Renewal of Public Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## What will it mean for Addison NW Supervisory Union Schools?

### Public Forum

November 19, 2009

Ferrisburgh Central School

### What do you value most about your school today?

- The size, it's a nice tight knit community school. All teachers can know all kids by name; you know the parents; can do things that you maybe can't do with a larger school.
- We have a stable school population.
- The values we have with the school: healthy food, outdoor things that take place, the local food lunch program is probably best in the state and perhaps in the country. There's an educational piece to it, we're growing some of our own food, kids make bread and pesto, kids help make the foods that are stored for the year, and we have a compost program.
- The Farm to School program is great. Kids plant, harvest and prep foods. The school has built relationships with local farmers. Works through Kathy Olander, our food service manager, who cultivates great relationships with local growers. Almost everything served at the harvest meal is grown locally.
- Kids do it all themselves; they make phone calls, make the connections to local farmers and bring back and present to the school in a whole day. The program brings us closer to our community and brings community business into the school.
- Our teachers are passionate, committed, enthusiastic, well-educated, good role models; they go above and beyond what's expected of teachers. They are involved with other things than just teaching during the day.
- There is a lot of parent involvement in the school; parents very welcome in the school
  - We have a schoolhouse banking program where students can make deposits once a week into a local bank.
  - 4-Winds program: 2 hour training program for parents who then teach a monthly science program in the classroom. It's a benefit to parents to be able to see how the classroom is structured as well as learn about science and teach it to the kids. Kids love the program.
  - Reading mentors, reading buddies – 25 children participate.
  - Sports program has many volunteers.
  - There's a knitting group once a week kids go to instead of recess.
- The PTO is strong. As a teacher I feel supported by the PTO if need extra funding with certain needs. They've worked to make the playground better and safer, there's a habitat area where kids can study outdoor habitats. We're doing a windmill project where kids learn about electricity.
- We have a good physical plant; it's well maintained, great septic system, good air circulation, and new gym floor.
- We have a good academic program. Good transition to the high school. Similar values with the high school.
- I like the individual attention I get as a parent and that the kids get.
- The class sizes are reasonable.
- We allocate the resources we need to support the special activities we have; there's always been a commitment to have technology, art, music, instrumental instruction, Spanish.
- Our special education program is exceptional; the staff helping the kids with their challenges is outstanding.
- The challenge program offers independent study topics to any student interested in the topic; usual about 5 students at a time. It's for kids that want an extra challenge and for anyone interested in the topic. The latest topic they're looking at is robots. They meet in the technology lab and look at all aspects of the topic. It intermingles art with computer with science with writing. A diverse group of kids all work together in creative ways.
- Value that the school board members know the school, its values, its needs.
- When our kids go to 7<sup>th</sup> grade it's recognizable that kids from Ferrisburgh are talented. They are prepared to take on all sorts of challenges. The whole district recognizes that but it doesn't necessarily get said. All the programs we offer here show in the kids as they enter the middle school.

- Healthy living and nutrition is important here, try to include the parents and make those connections as well.
- It's a cultural shift for our school: how kids are eating, taking care of their bodies, how we take care of our planet. It's been growing over the past 6 years. There's a wellness committee working on a set of guidelines on things such as listing alternates for bake sales to make kids aware.
- "Toddlers gym" is offered on Fridays for young infants to pre-schoolers. Helps make them comfortable in the school.
- Our outdoor classroom for outside learning. Use a whole approach to studying about the outdoors.
- "Kindercamp" in the summer for Kindergartners before they come into the school. Gives a nice transition from preschool. They take the bus to get a creemee and then back to the school. It's a highlight.
- Student prevention association group (SPA kids) – currently twelve 5/6 graders work with the guidance counselor on leadership opportunities in the school. They interview students with questions like "if you could do something other than sitting in the gym for ½ hour before school, what would it be?" They also connect with h.s. kids on drug and alcohol awareness. They lead community service and pull in other kids as well.

**From your point of view, what are the benefits and challenges to unification of schools in the ANWSU?**

- Would like to know – would it work, how would it work? What's the research show for schools and districts of this size? What have been the pros, cons, challenges, and celebrations?
- Our kids go to unified high school so we have an idea how it might work already.
- The focus has to be on what's going to help the students be most successful. I want every child to have the same resources and chance to education. It's complicated because each community values different things. I don't want our school to lose any of the programs we value in a unified district that might not recognize fully. For example, if one of the school's boilers stops working in 5 below zero, that will need to be taken care of. But when we're talking about pockets of money in a unified district, that's where the money would go, what about other priorities?
- Don't want to have our food service suffer; it's one of the strong points of the school. Are we willing to give up some of the things we value, some of our smaller programs? I would like to see some of the best models kept and shared between schools.
- With a unified budget, from that year of unification forward, there will be competing priorities of all the different schools. Decisions have to be made on unified basis.
- Would like to hear what the board sees are the benefits to the children.
- Would like to see this food program in all the schools, and in the high school.
- I consider Vergennes, Pantton, Addison all part of my community. There would be a benefit that all children get highest level of programming. All the schools want the best for their schools. I trust those who have been elected to serve on this. I see this as broader than just my school.
- Maybe it would be a win/win. Can we identify the things we can share between schools and make decisions based on that but still allow each school to control areas they want to? What are the things that would serve all of us district wide? Can we share transportation; solve some problems on a district level that we can't solve individually. Maybe someone from the Addison School could come talk with Kathy Olander about our Farm to School program to learn how she does it. Maybe we just consolidate certain things. Like setting up a maintenance program for the whole district where we can unify contracts for landscaping and other things like that. Could even include the h.s. Are there ways to do it without taking away what we have? Maybe we don't need a unified union or a change in our governance structure to make some changes that will benefit everyone financially and educationally.
- There is already coordination of curriculum. Every 5/6 grader in the district does the same math program. All the students take the same pre and final assessments. So how would this change it if we're already doing it? What's the reason to unify? Some of it's already there.

- How would unification affect teacher salaries? Do the different schools have different pay scales?
- If unification creates efficiencies and best practices, where will those savings be invested?
- In a unified district, teachers would be working for the district, not hired by individual schools. Might I be moved around to different schools in different years because that's where the need might be?
- There might be challenge with class sizes that vary over the years. Would have to juggle in the school. If there is flexibility with other schools, it might be easier to balance out.
- Maybe could happen without unification where schools could move teachers around if the teachers want to move. The district already knows where the needs are within the district year to year whereas the individual schools don't know what the other schools needs are.
- District already works together. But unification could help solve some problems. Like if the school can only support a half time teacher, maybe that school would consider cutting the position whereby in a unified district the teacher wouldn't have to be cut but could also be half time at another school.
- School has done an amazing job coming up with decisions, like what will we do with smaller class sizes, etc. They get creative about it so they don't have to cut a position.
- What would it look like, from PTO perspective? Can our PTO still fundraise for programs for our school? Or does it mean we fundraise all together?
- Would a unified school district give people living in towns without a school the choice about what school they could attend? How would the choice work? Waltham kids go to Vergennes now. Could those parents choose a school? I think they should have choice. It would be a benefit to allow a choice. The parents would have to drive them to the school.
- What if there is a year with dramatic population changes, would kids go to a different school to round out the numbers there?
- What about kids that go to Addison school but live closer to Ferrisburgh. Could they choose Ferrisburgh?
- This takes us out of the box a little where we can think creatively about elementary schools. What about having magnet schools, sustainable schools, art schools, schools with focuses that speak to kids with different interests. There's an opportunity to look creatively how the 3 schools could best serve our kids in a 21<sup>st</sup> century way.
- Concern about free choice. What if parents decide to change schools because they don't have the teacher they like, or some other reason? It would be hard for the schools to figure out their enrollment levels every year.
- Might unification be something that would be mandated by the state someday? Something we might not have input on?
- I see a benefit in that we as a community have an opportunity to structure this rather than having it mandated from above.
- How will it be financed? Will my tax rate go to Vergennes, Addison? They need to tell me the implications to my taxes.
- The tax structure now is based on crazy formulas. Can we do a cost analysis to see if we'd do better? How would the state view it in terms of whether we're meeting numbers? I would like to see an economic analysis from state perspective.
- Benefit: special education costs could be leveled, absorbed by a larger base. Could help schools in terms on not having a sudden emergency where we have to make drastic cuts to meet new special education needs that might come into a community.
- Unification speaks to class size as well. Kids with special needs going between towns, we can work together on their education and the funding for that.
- What happens to our NECAP scores – will they still be viewed still school by school, or district-wide?

**What is your vision for the future of school programs? What will the children of ANWSU need from their schools to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

- I would like take out food from the cafeteria for families.
- Cooking for Life program.
- Seniors come in for lunch here (they can); perhaps have senior housing right in this area and they could come for lunch.
- Language taught in the very young grades. Spanish, French, dabble in Asian.
- Have real bilingual education.
- Technology could be more advanced.
- Use it for education programs. Connecting with other schools.

- More possibilities for individualized instruction. Programs that would identify area kids are weak and need to work.
- For students who are visual learners, computers can help them grasp how photosynthesis works, for instance.
- Technology is a tool, but we really are teaching language arts, science; don't teach technology for its own sake.
- Communication is a great skill to learn. Computer is a one-way street. Concerned with too much focus on technology that we keep a balance and don't lose the social interaction of face-to-face.
- There is strong parent support in the school, but would like to see other members of the community share their talents, or history of Ferrisburgh with students. There are some walls with the community outside the parent connection. The school tends to be the community center. Once your kids leave here, you don't get a lot of the information anymore. How do we bring parents back after their kids leave here and how do we bring the community into the school? Our agricultural community could be brought in more.
- Ferrisburgh historical society is great example. Kids go to them when they do history day project. We could use them and they could come in a feel a part of the school.
- More community volunteers could do 4-Winds.
- Integrate the elderly; they have a lot to offer.
- Life-long learning is a value to foster in our kids. How to incorporate community into what we do and foster in our kids the idea that learning goes on beyond the classroom. How can we be better stewards of the earth when you're in school and once you leave?
- 100 years from now I want teachers to still have autonomy to teach the best way they know how and not be driven by what someone else thinks they should be doing.
- Want kids to always have summer off. Don't want to go to a full year. The day we go to school year-round would be a sad day for our country.
- There aren't HQT (highly qualified teacher) practices happening in all our schools. Teachers who are Innovative, stimulating, using best practices. Somehow there needs to be accountability and follow-up that they are putting out material in the best possible way and meeting different learning styles.
- Want to see the blurring of walls between school and community, particularly in the last couple of years of high school. It could be more meaningful.
- Learning needs to be fun, exciting, relevant.
- Could make sense to move the 6<sup>th</sup> grade to the middle school at some point in the future.
- We have a fabulous board both in this school and in the district. It's really important that we know that we can go to them and talk with them, and also count on them to stand up for what's right for students and not have to micro-manage every single piece but in the end look at what's best for students.

# Renewal of Public Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## What will it mean for Addison NW Supervisory Union Schools?

### Public Forum

December 2, 2009

Vergennes Union High School

### What do you value most about your school today?

- Teachers are trying to meet all the demands today in the face of dwindling resources such as testing requirements, a school day that still includes recess (which is lucky), etc. Teachers are trying hard to meet academic standards.
- I value the results. The students that graduate are doing very well. The graduation rate is good. I think they are prepared for the next stage in their life in whatever they may do.
- My children (3 attended K-12 in Vergennes) were prepared for the next steps after graduation. In the Elementary School there is a wonderful sense of community; teachers know parents and students, parents are welcome in the building. Once they get to high school it's still true though parents aren't in the building as much. All my kids, all on very different paths, were prepared for their next steps coming from this small community.
- I value that the community has supported the building facility and it has stayed that way. We are staffed in a way that we can continue to make it work. Also, as we hire, I value that we attract people with strong backgrounds to hire. The word is out that we're doing progressive things. In the education world around Vermont the projects we're working on are getting recognition.
- I appreciate the class size we're able to enjoy here; my child is having a better experience because of that.
- There seems to be a lot of good programs offered here. Not every school can offer all the programs they would like, but there are good opportunities here, and in the district. Kids have choices. Walden's music program is great. If we had to eliminate a school, it would be difficult to decide which one.
- I have recently met 3 families who have moved here from out of state. I value the reputation this area has; it's attracting people from outside the state.
- We are fortunate to have dedicated school board members who have participated in the process over a number of years. Vergennes has had too many principal changes in recent years.
- Would like to there to be better communication about what is going on in the school with community members that don't have kids in the school anymore; we pay taxes to support it and would like to feel more involved and connected.

### From your point of view, what are the benefits and challenges to unification of schools in the ANWSU?

- This is a hard question for lay people to answer. The committee working on it needs to clearly articulate the benefits of change – people don't like change – articulating in dollars as well as how teachers and students would benefit. Are their transportation reasons, etc? How can we save money and also improve the product? People don't like change; in Vermont we have a world-class ability for not liking change. If the benefits are dramatic enough, people will recognize that the change might be a good thing. Also, it would be better to solve problems ourselves rather than wait for people at the state level to tell us what to do.
- Here are some statistics that would help: the student/teacher ratio in VT is the lowest in the country; in recent years, the student population has decreased by 10%; yet educational funding continues to rise and is slated to increase by 2% each year for the next 3 years leading to an increase in state-wide property tax. We need to do something about how those statistics line up. Unification might be one strategy to lower costs.
- I was disappointed that unification didn't happen the last time. And even then the proposal didn't go far enough. We have to think broader than Addison County NW – I would like to see all Addison County unify. It would give a larger pool of talent and

resources. I would like to see student choice by subject rather than by school which could begin to address the problems of classroom size.

- Another statistic to look at is that our students in Vermont are achieving very high nationwide and we don't want to lose that. Look at the success of the students themselves coming out of the education system.
- We have a homogeneous socioeconomic group in Vermont so can't compare our positive achievements with big city schools that have kids with challenging circumstances. Be sure to use comparable sets of students with similar populations, like New Hampshire, in looking achievement numbers.
- An advantage of unification is that these issues could just be discussed with one board. Decisions could be made that would make sense across our whole school. Would like to see a unified Addison County. In Addison County we have 3 high schools and 1 tech school. Unification would provide improved educational opportunities for kids in all Addison County. Let's take it a step beyond just unifying NW.
- On challenge side, there are feelings amongst communities that the unification needs to be fair and equitable for each.
- A concern at Panton's town meeting last year about voting representation on a unified board.
- My concern is that it is a narrowing of a voice. Would be fewer board members and sometimes you don't always get the best person on the board. More voices could be helpful. My recommendation to the board, especially in communities that only gets one member, that those places should be given 2 board members, but each with only ½ vote. It would be the same board, but there would be more voices present. And sometimes people are sick and have to miss a meeting, that way there would be someone present. I'm also concerned about how the debt consumption will work out and feel fair for everyone. How to get to zero starting point. On the plus side, is there a cost savings? Would be flexibility of staff and students to move around within the district and use resources better. Schools could share half-time staff.
- If I were a superintendent, I'd rather go to one board meeting rather than 7 or 8. Attending lots of meetings is a drain and makes the job less attractive. Also, I don't object to having one person representing Panton, I would feel comfortable calling any board member and feel they would listen.
- This is a personal and emotional process which is hard to do in an objective way. In terms of laying out the process, can we involve objective people to make

recommendations who don't have an emotional attachment to the outcome? Someone from a university, a business person, someone from another state who's done something like this, etc.?

- It's amazing to see the number of people here tonight; I'm glad to see this interest.
- Each school has their own set of offerings and talents. In Vergennes we'd love to have a language, like Ferrisburgh who offers Spanish. Is there a way to share interests and talents between schools?
- A challenge to overcome with unification is that the average person doesn't want to lose local control of their school. School board members don't really understand what goes on in their school now. Can you imagine being a board member and having to know everything about all the buildings? Unification might be better for education, but there may not be much financial benefit.
- If we're going to unify, how can we make sure we attract the best board members? Responsibilities of board members will increase, there will be more work with fewer people, and they need to know so much. Let's look at how we attract people who would want that huge responsibility with little reward.
- Consolidation has to have benefits in sharing ideas and best practices and accessing resources and research electronically for making decisions. I'm sure there are other districts around the world with experience; rural management of a teaching process can't be any different than anywhere else. Other districts have had the same problems and solutions are out there for us to look at. Access those people who have already done it. Best practices will only take place with consolidation.
- We're talking about commitment to education and people's commitment. What are our responsibilities? A challenge will be to make sure it's clear that if you're on the board, you're committed to education. Also, make sure to create an atmosphere in the 5 towns that allows people to feel empowered and responsible at the same time. It won't be easy. It's hard to get people to serve now due to the time commitment. It will be a challenge and this committee has to address it. The benefit is that education continues to improve and that kids feel just as good about being part of the region as about their local school.
- When the going gets tough, people fall back to the status quo. There has to be collective agreement so people are willing to make the concessions that need to be made. If people think it's too hard, they won't do anything.

- There are larger districts in this country that are successful in terms of education. It would be good to know how they function and what they see are the advantages.
- Often at school board meetings there's a public comment opportunity, but no public present to comment. Maybe having just one board would increase community involvement.
- Want to see more interaction between the community and the schools. Sometimes the public may feel that they aren't knowledgeable enough about the issues to comment. How to help people feel welcome at the table?
- Communication to everybody is a challenge. How many people really read the pieces of paper that are sent out? Lack of understanding is why it failed before; people vote "no" to change when they don't understand it.
- Can we look back to the other 2 times in history when districts were created or consolidated? In the 60s, there were 6 schools in Addison where kids could walk to their local school. Then they consolidated to one school. Our 5 towns were put into a district. This same conversation has occurred in the past and we've ended up with more consolidation. What are the lessons from the past?
- Just returned here after 25 years. This opportunity could be a benefit and challenge with boards redefining themselves. There are many governance models that work in different situations. Give thoughtful reflection on the different models out there. It's easier to start a new structure with a model that works than try to change once you're into it.
- Would like to hope we don't get into having silos of separate departments that aren't coordinated together. Take advantage of our unique smallness in coordinating better and placing people so they don't feel they are departmentalized. It's best when people can share skills across the whole system.
- Will this be enough? What if we can't come out of our economic challenges with this? What about looking at an even larger consolidation. We'll need to continue the conversation about the 'what if.' It's an opportunity to work in ways we may not have thought of before. People will want to know the hard numbers. It may be useful to have a comparison about the cost savings of a larger consolidation. It may be something we have to revisit in 10 years.

## **What is your vision for the future of school programs? What will the children of ANWSU need from their schools to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

- I see a universally designed building structure and curriculum that allows access for all that also incorporates a social emotional aspect.
- Students at all levels need more diverse opportunities, particularly at the high school level. They need to be able to probe subjects in depth. There are 3 high schools within 15 minutes of each other and all are trying to do the same things. We're duplicating efforts and in the process watering things down. How can we share between them so students can go in depth and experience the best speakers and instructors in a particular area?
- We need to foster innovation and creative thinking. We don't know and can't comprehend what the world will be when our kids who are Kindergartners now graduate.
- Helping kids become independent learners; take lessons from home-schoolers. Instead of putting students in a grueling and regimented system of 40 minutes on this and that, home-school students' can focus on things they are interested in which increases their learning power. We need kids to be independent learners and they need to know how what they are learning applies to their life now and in the future. A background in independent thinking allows them to make good decisions when they get out of school.
- School shouldn't be defined to just K-12, but should be looked at as an educational community where adults can take classes; Mom can take a class in the evening while the daughter is doing something else in the building. We're all going to have 2 or 3 different careers and we all need to retool. Education doesn't stop at 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Kids need to be more renaissance people and diversify. Have them learn a technical skill at same time they are preparing for college.
- The Vermont State College system is working on a program that looks at a prek-16 education model different than today's model. What are the opportunities that kids need at a cost we can afford? We need to look outside our 4 walls so to speak. We'll come to see that as really important. From legislative point of view, we don't want to make the decision in Montpelier. We like this kind of forum.

- We have fabulous colleges in this state. Schools should be more integrated and involved with colleges and businesses in the state for broader access outside the school.
- It's easy for those in the legislature to say they want the people to decide but we need leadership in Montpelier who will have done the research and who can say "here's what we urge you to consider. And if you need help with it, we'll be happy to help."
- If the trend of declining enrollments continues in Vermont, the issue of how to bring fewer children together in an economic structure that people can afford and keep education level high at the same time will be ongoing.
- We have to catch up into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in our education system. School hours are still designed around farming schedules. We need more flexibility in school schedules; we need to utilize the building year round; we need more community access to the schools so students see community members and community members see the students.
- In this digital age and with the new digital tools that are available, we can get resources to a broad range of people. Schools will have to move more quickly to use digital tools, videos, transferring of information, teaching skills on a screen; students don't have to travel to get education. Consolidation will allow us to buy the tools cheaper.
- University of Phoenix is successful nationally educating people learn through internet. Champlain College has online classes. Can we change the model; take teachers that are especially good in certain area and have them specialize and project their skill beyond their physical presence with use of internet.
- Everyone has their own field of interest. It would be good to work with students and their parents, guidance counselors and teachers to help each one find their own path with where they want to go in the future.
- Students will grow up and find that the world is their community with everything that's possible as well as the responsibilities that go along with that. We can broaden kid's perspectives about what their real community is beyond our town, state, country. There are models of doing that: sister schools, exchanges, co-curricular. As you reinvent yourself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, it's critical to get them ready for the world they are going to be in.
- Technology connects you to anywhere in the world.
- We already do know many of the skills and characteristics for success: communication, reading, writing, working as a team. Very often we're not giving students' feedback on how well they are doing on developing those skills that will be needed in the future.
- Middlebury is having challenges in helping students with scheduling. It's frustrating for students who want to get to an area but can't. The 3 high schools should be able to work together and figure it out. Kids are getting into college, but not into their 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> choice; they're not necessarily getting prepared in ways that make them competitive.
- Have students been given opportunity to respond to these questions? They should come to table and share their thoughts.
- As a teacher at an international school, I found that the success of those communities is derived from a real community feeling. The school itself thinks out of the box. Members of community, in addition to faculty members, bring their own skill sets and teach too; students within the student body help other students. There's a whole sense of community and well being that manifests itself in positive way. No reason we can't do something similar.



Facilitated by: **Vermont Council on Rural Development**

PO Box 1384, Montpelier, VT 05601 • 802-223-6091 • [info@vtrural.org](mailto:info@vtrural.org) • [www.vtrural.org](http://www.vtrural.org)