

The HUUSD board is responsible for overseeing the education of students pre-k through 12, in a district which stretches from Waterbury to Warren. Many of the people who sit on the board were here last year as part of the Act 46 Study Committee and some were not. Back then, we were the designated representatives of our local schools, charged with negotiating the terms of a merger agreement. At the close of negotiations, the study committee brought forward The Articles of Agreement, which explained the conditions of our merger. According to the study committee report, the Articles were intended to protect the concerns of the local boards and communities “without hampering the work of any future board.” Among other issues, they protected buildings in the first four years of operation, explained what would happen with fund balances, and made a commitment, but provided no timeline, to allow intra-district school choice. Voters in our six separate towns overwhelmingly approved the Articles. These results were certified by local clerks, the Secretary of Education, and the Secretary of State. Our board was sworn in on August 31, when we took an oath to “faithfully execute the office of officer of the Harwood Unified Union School District and .. therein do equal right and justice to all persons to the best of my judgement and ability.”

I am bringing my complaint before you for several reasons. I feel both a personal responsibility, and under the rules which mandate how our board operates, an obligation to bring to light questions concerning conflict of interest and ethical conduct. Failing to discuss them could hamper our independence, our integrity, and our decision making authority as a board. The issues I raise stem from the letter distributed to the HUUSD board on 12/29 by the Fayston Elementary School board. This letter was drafted and approved by a quorum of three Fayston board members. Two of these three are also members of our HUUSD board.

My first point of context is WWSU Policy B3-R: conflict of interest, which was adopted separately by each of the schools in our SU. It states “A board member will not give the impression that his or her position on any issue can be influenced by anything other than a fair presentation on all sides of the question.” The Fayston letter raises the concern that HUUSD board members have reached a conclusion without considering, among other things, anticipated revenues, discussion of which is on the agenda for tonight. In its letter the Fayston board has indicated its opposition to the cuts and new spending without this yet to be presented information. It appears our Fayston members have committed to this position without hearing a full and fair presentation. Is this the case? Will their vote be influenced by the Fayston board’s stance and its commitment to Fayston school district voters to protect the staffing structure in its building rather than the information before us?

Secondly, the VSBA code of ethics explains that a board member’s primary concern must be for the students in his or her district. By considering the needs of the Fayston school first and foremost, does the letter consider all students pre-k through 12 in the HUUSD? Does it even consider Fayston students 7 through 12? Furthermore, this letter was distributed to all Fayston School parents and staff before it was brought to the HUUSD board for discussion and possible rebuttal. A link to the letter was posted on the Mad River Valley Front Porch Forum, but it was not distributed throughout the other 5

towns of HUUSD. The letter incorrectly and disrespectfully labels colleagues as inexperienced and is otherwise not respectful in tone. Its broadcast to a limited group has reinforced much false and potentially misleading information, including, but not limited to the following:

- The central premise is that the HUUSD board and superintendent are breaking a promise to maintain the status quo in year one. Contrary to this thesis, the Act 46 Study Committee did not promise to operate a level service budget or maintain the status quo in our first year. Rather, according to the final report, the new board would work toward solutions that (p. 6) provide equity and quality in educational opportunity, maximize operational efficiencies (including improving student to teacher ratios p.11), and promote transparency and accountability at a cost taxpayers value. According to the section of the final report titled Projected Savings, the study committee predicted that savings, at that date unidentified, could be found once the parameters of a merger were realized. That section goes on to state that, "Another area in which to explore potential savings is class size. There has been a decrease in student population in most of our schools." "Class sizes should be brought into alignment with the Vermont Quality Standards. Not only would it save money, but some of the potential savings could be redirected into insuring equity of education for all students, and meeting or exceeding the Quality Standards, while lowering per pupil expenditure. Many times over the past five years there have only been 8 to 11 students in several classrooms at different schools throughout the SU. These micro-classrooms tend not to be the rich learning or social environments we seek for our children, and drive up per pupil spending."
- The age of the district has no bearing on the HUUSD board's authority. According to Article 10, upon approval, the new district would have all authority necessary to prepare for educational operations on July 1, 2017. This includes writing the FY 2017-2018 budget. The board's authority is complete, and nothing in the articles obligates or makes them subject to influence from other boards within the SU (even in an advisory capacity.)
- The letter gives the impression that staffing should be tied to preserving capacity, when in fact, it is and has been a function of student population. WWSU policy: G-14R Class Size Procedures. Policy is written and approved by boards. It is the job of administrators to implement policy procedures. It is not the board's job to run schools.
- Contrary to the claim that we have done no visioning or strategic planning, we do have a detailed and thorough WWSU action plan in place. It can be found on the WWSU website; we will have a presentation and discussion about it next month. At one of our earlier meetings we discussed moving forward with respect to the existing plan, which all the current recommendations have done.
- The letter states Fayston will bring a \$91,000 reserve fund to the new district. To the best of my knowledge this money is intended to be spent on the school's new maker

space in the current fiscal year, meaning Fayston will bring no maintenance reserve funds to the new district in FY 2018. Also, should we consider funds which will no longer be available such as town rents or one time contingency funds when discussing per pupil expenditures on a building by building basis? Should we discuss per pupil expenditures on a building by building basis at all given we are a pre-k through 12 system spanning 7 buildings? Without a merger, Fayston would face losing phantom students and their small schools grant. Both would further increase PPE and make it look less favorable when compared to that in other buildings.

- Every one of us who has also sat on a local board has grappled with these types of cuts as a regular part of the budgeting process. The letter makes no reference to how Fayston would address this year's budget absent a merger, leading one to believe that since the budget will now be spread across the HUUSD, it is okay to preserve positions which might otherwise be cut. Should we leverage one building as an asset at everyone else's expense rather than invest potential savings in improving equity and equality for everyone? This and a board which would work to improve the quality of education pre-k through 12 throughout our district was the promise that the Study Committee made.

Finally, Vermont statute requires we run our meetings and conduct business according to Robert's Rules of Order, which say members should not vote on questions in which they have a direct or pecuniary interest.

It is important that we, as a board, discuss the potential for conflicts of interest and associated violations of codes of ethics. The likelihood exists that it will come up again as we move forward, therefore better to have a discussion about what it is, how it might be present in our work, and how best to avoid it. It is entirely possible that tonight's finding may be that none exists or no actions should be taken.

It is my prerogative to move this issue to the floor for discussion, which I will do as I don't believe we can address the original letter without the conflict issue coming up.

Thank you.

Christine Sullivan