

**EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES EXPLORED BY
PREVIOUS AND EXISTING ACT 46 STUDY TEAMS**

SUMMARY DISCUSSIONS/ISSUES

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

What are the potential benefits, if any of:

- Planning and coordinating professional development offerings and peer support, K-12.
- Restructuring Professional Development to reflect identified instructional challenges PreK-12.
- Sharing best practice across all schools in a given union, based on district and school centered strategic and instructional needs.

GRANT/PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

Would the scale and enlarged focus of district centered grant development enable member schools to:

- More effectively compete for grants that can enhance the district's capacity to meet the States new Education Quality Standards and promote personalized learning and other transformational efforts?
- Create more opportunities to attract post-secondary and private/business partnerships aimed at strengthening instructional practices or providing a wider range of high school learning options.
- Develop innovative partnerships with post-secondary institutions for placing student teachers and interns?
- Provide additional opportunities in support of teachers interested in expanding their repertoires and versatility through the acquisition of multiple license endorsements or in the process of license renewal?

Rationale:

A unified district might lead to greater success in forging and acquiring school development grants and partnerships due to the fact that most educational grant providers are looking to make large systemic impacts across multiple schools in addition to funding the development of instructional practices that better serve the needs of students, particularly economically underserved students across a district. (e.g. scale of potential change and development is an important criteria in any given grant proposal)

RESTRUCTURING OF EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY MODELS:

In considering longer-term, more dramatic change, many study committees speculated on a variety of innovations that a unified district might explore in order to students in their S.U. with a broader array of educational delivery opportunities. Most of these ideas were seen as requiring additional study after any potential merger, but were recognized as potential lines of educational opportunity only in a unified district. These ideas included:

Expanded curriculum opportunities through coordination and sharing across existing districts. Examples:

- Enhanced elementary and middle school program alternatives/enhancements available to students through coordination of programs among existing schools or through joint ventures or mergers?
- Exploring a united or integrated high school program among any or all of the current high schools—either at multiple locations or through the creation of a new regional high school.
- Development of magnet schools or schools as “specialized centers of excellence?”
- Exploring a comprehensive approach to effectively serving students of the region through studying factors drawing students away from their local schools and seeking to replicate or exceed those external educational offerings within the new district.

SINGLE BOARD AUTHORITY:

The central proposition, question, and challenge of Act 46 is the streamlining of multiple governance structures into a unified strict Board and administrative team accountable for the development and delivery of equitable educational opportunities of the highest quality for all the children in a given district in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

What opportunities, if any, might this kind of restructuring produce? What are the challenges? To what extent do existing structures limit or enhance the realization of educational excellence K-12? In considering these broad questions, study committees have also explored

- *The extent to which existing governance structures might limit broader patterns of planning and accountability? What would it take for multiple boards to think and act with a district-wide focus? How would this work? What are the challenges associated in moving to a single board? What might be lost?*

- *Would a more unified approach lead to more effective student outcomes? Study teams have explored whether a more unified process, where each grade is viewed as a cumulative step in a comprehensive journey might lead to a more coherent and successful educational experience for all students.*
- *Might existing district boards work find ways to more effectively work with one another to address PreK-12 educational issues? How? Under existing structures, how would differences in policy or approach be resolved? If everyone agrees that K-12 coordination is crucial, why has this goal been so difficult to achieve in the past?*

In examining these questions, study committees have focused on a number of governance and strategic issues including:

- Student data collection and reporting - collecting, reporting and analyzing student data PreK-12 might support better coordination, continuity and responsible allocation of resources throughout the district.
- Focus and accountability - Would a unified district and a single board, governing a Prek-12 system, be more focused on and accountable for student results at every level? Would attention and accountability to every grade in the system become more of a necessity because staff, administration and the board would be responsible for collective results of all students?
- Strategic Policy and Planning – Are there any advantages for the delivery of quality educational services when policies and improvement plans are developed and implemented for all students PreK-12 rather than the current, (potentially more fragmented) PreK-6, 7-8, and 9-12 planning process used in most supervisory unions.
- Educational Reform - A unified district could explore a greater variety of educational delivery models PreK-12, including expanded school choice options, magnet programs, and alternative grade level organization.
 - ✓ Policies and procedures could be written and revised to respond to exceptional circumstances and the needs of students, schools and communities. For example, currently, in most unions, tuition is required for students to enroll in elementary schools outside of their town of residence. Would the flexibility and ability to provide some level of school choice for students and families have the potential to expand and enhance educational outcomes?
 - ✓ Formation of a unified district might allow for more flexibility in the use of facilities and resources. A unified board would be empowered to use and share personnel, facilities and financial resources to

address the emerging and immediate instructional needs of every school in the district.

CENTRAL OFFICE: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP VS. MANAGERIAL RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Reduction of redundant managerial activities between and among districts, might allow greater time for district administrators and building principals to engage in more robust patterns of strategic planning, curriculum leadership, school development, and administrative team building. How might this be facilitated in existing structures? Is such a reallocation of leadership practicable in current governance structures in order to maximize coherent patterns of instructional leadership?

FLEXIBLE STAFFING PATTERNS:

Most study committees explored how/if a consolidated district might allow staff to be better allocated from one school to another in order to meet the immediate and changing needs of students (particularly given the ongoing changes in demographics that often lead to challenging available school specific staffing and building resources).

Currently, in most S.U.'s, the majority of staff are employees of the local district or the S.U.. This significantly limits the administration's ability to adjust staffing based on changing academic and evolving demographic patterns. Often, districts make additional hires in response to needs that arise within their current district instead of studying the entire Supervisory Union (SU) to identify existing staff that could be reassigned or shared. Specifically:

Teacher Staffing:

- ✓ Flexibility in staffing assignments could provide additional alternatives beyond additional hires to adjust staffing assignments based on need, current demographic realities and staff expertise. Would shared staffing patterns potentially save money and strengthen the continuity and coordination of personnel. Often, individual districts in a given union are faced with the choice of reducing (or increasing staff) because of a shift in student population while another district is facing the exact opposite reality. Does a

unified district provide additional ways to respond to the often complicated ebb and flow of student demographics? What are the challenges that go with the sharing of staff and building resources?

- ✓ Is there an additional benefit of a unified approach to staffing that could result in the district more fully realizing its investment in training newly hired employees rather than losing them to staffing cuts. School-based training and mentoring involves a considerable investment in time and money. Keeping teachers in the system could enable district communities to realize the full potential of this financial commitment.

Non-Teacher staffing:

Many of the efficiencies and benefits pertaining to teaching staff could also relate to non-teaching staff members. A unified district would have the authority to shift and use personnel based on student population, student needs, staff needs, programming changes, building renovations and staff certifications (e.g. Master Electrician License, Master Plumber License, HVAC License, Physical Trainer Certification, Counseling License etc.). This could reduce the need to contract with outside service providers. Furthermore, it is an efficient and cost effective method of aligning personnel to requirements, responsibilities and obligations. What are the challenges that go with sharing these kinds of resources?

EQUITY IN PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES:

Equalized programming opportunities for all students within the union might be advanced with the formation of a unified district. Currently, resources, offerings, staffing and supplemental support varies from district to district within the union. Would a unified school district be a first step in reducing or eliminating the disparities in support services, staffing and programs that now exist between schools in the union? Additionally, are there opportunities for program enrichment through the sharing of staff?(e.g. some schools have an enrichment program, others do not; instructional support can vary between districts; supplemental support may not always be equal due the pressures on individual budgets – this challenge might also apply to the existing equity of lack thereof of building infrastructure.)

Currently local districts take real ownership of the responsibility to make the hard choices that go with creating equitable educational opportunities for the students in their care. What would it mean to centralize this kind of decision-making? What would it mean to attempt to balance the needs of the students throughout the district? What are the cultural challenges associated with such a change? Is a unified perspective the only way to approach these issues?

TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology as a teaching and communication tool has expanded exponentially in recent years. Parents, colleges/universities and employers are expecting students to have adequate technology skills and understand its capabilities. Equalized conditions and support of technology is essential in the successful transition of students to work or higher education. Would a more centralized model of IT planning better facilitate meeting the needs of students throughout the union? In this regard study committees have considered the pro's and cons of:

- Assembling a centralized team of technology support personnel to maintain systems and services;
- Performing these functions in a more effective and efficient manner if the variances in equipment, software, and platform were more standardized. (apple vs Mac, etc.).
- Eliminating any differences in the investment member school districts have made in technology over the past several years.
- Pooling resources to enable a more competitive bidding process.
- Insuring that students are familiar with the appropriate tech resources.
- Creating a unified reporting and website presence for communicating among members of the community.

Would a unified school district increase the likelihood of resources being distributed evenly and provides flexibility in the allocation of resources based on necessity? Would the increased scale of a unified district could allow schools to upgrade their technology systems more often and efficiently and better support students, staff and families in their use.

EDUCATIONAL DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:

Data compilation and analysis between and among schools, optimizes the effective use of any curriculum and data management system (VCAT) by creating a predictable user-friendly reporting tool that affords more opportunities for universal and streamlined staff and program development, as well as, creating transparency for parents and community members over the performance of their schools. Many study committee's have considered how a more centralized management of data collection and analysis might enhance school improvement initiatives.

RESIDENCY ISSUES/TRANSITORY POPULATIONS:

- A consolidated district could give families who move between local districts the option to have their children remain in their current school. A certain population of students within every supervisory union, move from one

school to the other and then back, disrupting the flow and delivery of their education.

- Currently, significant administrative time is spent verifying the residency status of students. This time might be better spent in school leadership/program development activities, leaving the task of establishing residency to the central office?

DISTRICT VS. SCHOOL CULTURE:

Currently each district within an S.U. has specific building-based patterns of student management, support, and intervention that define and shape the culture and human interactions between the students, families, and teachers within each school. This often creates challenges for students transitioning between schools (including moving to the high school) and for teachers in creating and reinforcing important school norms. In addition, it can create challenges for districts considering consolidation. What are the risks, challenges, and potential rewards of creating more effective district-wide cultures? In the face of any contemplated move towards a unified district, how might we preserve the individuality and uniqueness of our local schools while at the same time creating more effective patterns of teamwork and shared planning?

- Would a district consolidation encourage a more effective Pre-K to 12 discussion of best practice and hopefully lead to a more unified agreement about important cultural norms and practices, leading to a more predictable and unified approach to addressing the social/emotional needs of all students in the district?

Citations:

- ❖ *Report on the Proposed Supervisory Union Boundary Change between Windsor Northwest and Orange-Windsor Supervisory Unions – January 6, 2015*
- ❖ *Chittenden East Regional Education District (RED) Planning Committee Report – February 2011*
- ❖ *Barre Act 46 Study Committee – in progress*
- ❖ *Orleans Southwest Study Committee Study Committee – July 2014*
- ❖ *Mountain Towns Study Committee – January 5, 2012*
- ❖ *Chittenden South Study Committee – November 15, 2011*