

Bob Mason: Testimony – February 5th, 2015
Vermont Association of School Business Officials (VASBO)
Chittenden South Supervisory Union

Good Morning, By way of introductions and to establish that I may have perspectives relevant to your considerations on the topic of education, PreK – 12 in Vermont... I am Bob Mason, currently Chief Operations Officer for Chittenden South Supervisory Union serving the communities of Charlotte, Hinesburg, St George, Shelburne, Williston and Champlain Valley Union High School.

I am a member for the Vermont Association of School Business Officials (VASBO) and currently serve as association Past President

In prior years I served 10 years on the CVU and CSSU School Boards, 5 years as chair. Additionally I have 10 years experience in Aerospace General Management having P&L responsibility for an over \$50M business and 15 years experience in Manufacturing management directing the activities of over 900 employees. I have a familiarity with organization structures, restructures rightsizings, downsizings and such. It is clear to me that the governance structure we have currently for Prek-12 education in Vermont is archaic, inefficient and does little to improve student outcomes in an efficient focused manner.

First my perspective as a member and Past President of VASBO. I'll lean on past work done by the association and read from a now dated study published in February of 2010. I have left you a copy of the white paper and in the interest of candor tell you that a number of years has passed and the association's conclusions will now be called into question with just the passage of time. I'll read the first three paragraphs.....

[....read From VASBO White Paper]

My thoughts and opinions voiced from here on are my own and are related to my own context at Chittenden South and do not correlate directly to the challenges and opportunities that may exist in other SU's or districts across the state.

For Chittenden South the journey to a more appropriate mode of operation regardless of the overlying problematic governance structure has been ongoing since the mid 1990's. At that time it was readily apparent to key players in the system that: 5 schools reporting to seven different boards, and splitting ownership for success and failure amongst 34 board members, a superintendent, and five principals in a poorly understood model of shared responsibility was not the best for kids. We wouldn't wish that sort of structure on anyone if we were starting over.

Our objectives at that time focused first on the job of educational leadership driving improved student outcomes. What we had in the early 90's was a confusing overlap of responsibilities between Superintendent, Principals and Boards. Compounding our problems we asked Principals to at the same time be the operations head for such diverse activities as food service, transportation, finance, facilities and school safety, to name a few. The breadth alone added to inevitable performance disappointment in at least two or three of these areas.

By bringing expertise to manage these other areas to the table we were able to shift and focus the attention of educational leaders towards students and student outcomes. Secondly we are now able to provide some much needed attention to those "other" areas of the operation as well.

While success have been had over the years, our current average cost per student , even though in costly Chittenden County is \$1600 under the state average. The current structure is fragile, heavily dependent on the possible qualms or concerns of any number of board members, boards or principals desiring some contrary outcome. Couple that with the turnover currently seen in all three ranks, Superintendent, Principal and Business Manager, the process is slow at best.

What are the financial and non-financial implications to moving to a new form of governance in the longer term?... there are two in my mind

#1 Improved student outcomes through the better utilization of gifted and talented education leaders focused on students and

#2 More effective leadership direction over other operational responsibilities of a school.

By bringing these together under a single district structure it will allow sufficient size for the proper talent and expertise to be on task.

Those other areas include at a minimum...

Food Service: Consolidating purchasing, combining food prep operations, consolidating other business processes such as menu development and preparation ...all to improve quality, improve participation and reduce costs.

Transportation: We currently support the schools of Chittenden South with both in house drivers and buses, and the services of an outside contractor. The biggest opportunities I see on the horizon are group purchasing of vehicles and more effective route development to optimize costs.

Finances: Within our SU we operate on one financial and human resources system, but support five schools making procurement decisions independently with five distinctly different processes. Leveraging purchasing volume to lower prices is made that much more difficult.

Building and Facilities: Long term facility planning, decisions to invest in buildings and procurement, spending in support of operations and maintenance are all made locally in our system on the shoulders of a many times overworked, facility supervisor. How much better we could be if we pooled resources, identified key challenges, more effectively dealt with the issues.

I have chosen to focus my remarks on the need for governance change first as I believe it enables system wide changes in the other areas I believe to also be important: equity of experience, quality of student outcomes and efficiency/cost.

In conclusion, Secretary Holcombe has done an admirable job I think in bringing focus to the sense we need to change, in the interest of students statewide. We need to ambitiously revamp the governance system to enable the change we so need to bring to our children with improved equity across the state, increased quality in our primary purpose of educating and finally focus on the efficiency of the work we all do to lesson a bit the financial burden we place on the system.

Our Association would welcome the opportunity to return at a later point in your process when you might want more focused perspectives on changes you have under consideration.

I appreciate the time you have afforded me and would be willing to answer any questions you might have.

Bob Mason
2/5/14