

**Interim Report on Act 153: An Act Relating to  
Voluntary School District Merger, Virtual Merger,  
Supervisory Union Duties, and Including Secondary  
Students with Disabilities in Senior Year Activities  
and Ceremonies**

Interim Report to the Senate and House Committees on  
Education

**Submitted January 30, 2013**

**By**



*The University of Vermont*

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## **Report on Act 153: Voluntary School District Merger Activity and Process (CY12)**

*This report is the third interim report to be submitted to the Vermont legislature pursuant to Act 153 by the James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research at the University of Vermont. The purpose of the report is to provide support to the Agency of Education as it considers recommendations on actions to “encourage or require merger by nonparticipating school districts.” During CY 2012, only one of three voluntary mergers put to the voters was approved. Although the record so far is not encouraging for the merger process under Act 153, the experiences of the communities implementing Vermont’s first Act 153 merger may make it easier for other communities to approve and implement mergers of their own. The Jeffords Center conducted a qualitative case study to better understand the early experiences of the individuals charged with carrying out the mergers that resulted in the creation of the new Mountain Towns Regional Educational District (RED) and Two Rivers Supervisory Union (SU). We also present the most current status of merger activities reported by the Vermont Agency of Education, and a survey proposal with a draft questionnaire prepared by students at UVM enrolled in a graduate course in survey research methods.*

Vermont’s Act 153 stimulates voluntary mergers of school districts, specifies certain responsibilities for supervisory unions (SU), and addresses the inclusion of secondary students with disabilities in senior year activities and ceremonies. The Act (Sec. 8) calls on the University of Vermont’s James M. Jeffords Center (Jeffords Center) to collaborate with the state Agency of Education (Formerly Department of Education) and participating school districts to monitor and evaluate the voluntary merging of Vermont school districts.

Act 153 § 8 (c) On or before January 15, 2018, the James M. Jeffords Center and the Department of Education shall present a final report concerning the study required in subsection (b) of this section, including recommendations to the house and senate committees on education regarding what further actions, if any should be pursued to encourage or require merger by nonparticipating school districts, and shall provide interim reports in each January until that date.

In early 2012, additional legislation was passed to further encourage districts to merge. Act 156 provided for additional transition funding (including funds specifically designated for the merger of the Rutland Windsor and Rutland Southwest SUs), increased the range of options for structuring mergers, and allowed for the creation of a “Modified Unified Union School District” to allow mergers to proceed without towns that do not want to participate.<sup>1</sup>

This third interim report describes known merger activities in 2012 and presents the results of a case study of the successful merger that resulted in the creation of the Mountain Towns RED and the Two Rivers SU. We also present a proposed statewide survey of voters on voluntary mergers, which could inform future initiatives (Appendix). Previous reports concerning activities in CY 2010 and 2011 have been submitted to the legislature by the James M. Jeffords

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/2012/Acts/ACT156.pdf>

Center and the Vermont Agency of Education.<sup>2,3</sup> The first report covered activities in 2010 and focused primarily on research design. The second report presented results from an exit poll conducted during the referendum on the Chittenden East merger initiative, which was not approved by the electorate.

The Jeffords Center's grant funding from the US Department of Education is scheduled to end as of September 30, 2013, which means that the Center can no longer subsidize the cost of research activities pursuant to Act 153. The Jeffords Center will continue to provide research services by request, on the basis of service agreements that specify the scope of work, costs and payment mechanisms.

## **Research Activities Completed**

### *Agency of Education Records*

In the first year of implementation, a database of contacts with school administrators was compiled by staff from the Agency of Education and the Vermont School Boards Association. These records have been maintained by Agency staff and provide a listing of all supervisory unions known to be engaging in merger activities through December 2012. Six supervisory unions have had their articles approved by the State Board, four of which have been rejected by voters and one of which was withdrawn by its board. As of December 31, 2012, a single district merger has been approved, concurrent with one merger of supervisory unions. The new Mountain Towns RED was formed by combining the districts of Landgrove, Londonderry, Peru, and Weston, and moving them from the Windsor Southwest SU to Bennington-Rutland. At the same time, the new Two Rivers SU was formed by combining the Rutland Windsor SU with the remainder of Windsor Southwest. As of December 2012 there were at least 18 research studies underway or approved by vote. Four proposed REDs have been rejected by voters (Addison Northwest, Chittenden East, Franklin West, and Orange Southwest). The reports summarized in the following table represent activities known to and reported by the Agency of Education; other activities may have occurred that had not yet been recorded as of December 2012.

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<sup>2</sup> James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research & Vermont Department of Education (2011). Report on Act 153 of the 2009 Adjourned Session: An Act Relating to Voluntary School District Merger, Virtual Merger, Supervisory Union Duties, and Including Secondary Students with Disabilities in Senior Year Activities and Ceremonies. Report to the Vermont Senate and House Committees on Education.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research & Vermont Department of Education (2012). Report on Act 153 of the 2009 Adjourned Session: An Act Relating to Voluntary School District Merger, Virtual Merger, Supervisory Union Duties, and Including Secondary Students with Disabilities in Senior Year Activities and Ceremonies. Report to the Vermont Senate and House Committees on Education.

**Table 1. Status of known current merger activities as of December 2012**

|  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| <b>RED Articles Approved by State Board with Successful Community Votes [5 Bds. into one]</b>          |                            |
| Windsor SW [5 bds.] Mountain Towns, now a RED in Bennington-Rutland SU [1 bd.]                         |                            |
| <b>SU Consolidation Completed [2 SUs into 1]</b>   |                            |
| Rutland Windsor and Windsor SW SUs [2 SUs] to Two Rivers SU  |                            |
| <b>RED Articles Approved by State Board with Failed Community Votes [4 SUs and 15 Bds.]</b>            |                            |
| Addison Northwest [4 bds.]   |                            |
| Chittenden East [6 bds.]   |                            |
| Franklin West [2 bds.]   |                            |
| Orange Southwest [3 bds.]  |                            |
| <b>RED Articles Approved by State Board and Postponed at 706 Committee Request [1 SU and 3 bds.]</b>   |                            |
| Lamoille South [3 bds.]  |                            |
| <b>RED Committees not recommending a Merger Vote [2 SUs, 12 bds.]</b>                                  |                            |
| Chittenden South [7 bds.]  |                            |
| Southwest VT [5 bds.]  |                            |
| <b>Local Boards Voted to Undertake 706/RED Study [8 SUs and 37 bds]</b>                                |                            |
| Addison Central [8 bds.]   | Orange Southwest [3 bds.]  |
| Chittenden South [6 bds.]  | Orleans Southwest [6 bds.] |
| Windsor SW [5 bds.]  | Windham Central [6 bds.]   |
| Bennington-Rutland [9 bds.]  | Franklin Central [4 bds.]  |
| <b>SU Joint Agreements [4 SUs]</b>   |                            |
| Chittenden Central, Franklin Central and Franklin West SUs: Combined provision of technology services. |                            |
| Windham County SUs: Transportation (under discussion).   |                            |
| <b>Preliminary Research – SU Joint Agreements [5 SUs]</b>  |                            |
| Blue Mountain/Orange East/Rivendell  |                            |
| Windsor Northwest and Orange Windsor   |                            |

|  |
|--|
| <b>SUs/SDs Directed by the State Board to Conduct Boundary Change Studies</b> (studies may include neighboring SUs/SDs) [5 SUs/SDs]  |
| Battenkill Valley SU   |
| Essex Caledonia SU   |
| Rutland-Windsor SU   |
| St. Johnsbury SD   |
| Washington South SU  |
| Windham SW SU  |
| Windsor NW SU  |
| Winooski SD  |
| <b>Expanded Grant Opportunities Created in Act 156</b>   |
| More than 6 SUs and a significant number of districts have applied for various grants created in Act 156. We know of others under development. Any precise number would be misleading since some of the projects could blend with others. The Agency of Education is evaluating applications received. |

**Early Experiences Implementing Voluntary School District Mergers: Case Study of Mountain Towns and Two Rivers Mergers**

There are still no available data that can be used to systematically evaluate the outcomes of mergers completed under Act 153 on a statewide basis. There has been only one successful merger to date, which was initiated in 2012. In this merger, the towns of Landgrove, Londonderry, Peru and Weston joined to form the Mountain Towns Regional Educational District (RED), jointly moving from the Windsor Southwest SU to the Bennington-Rutland SU. At the same time the new Two Rivers SU was created by consolidating the remaining communities in the Windsor Southwest SU with the Rutland Windsor SU. In order to better understand the change process, preliminary outcomes, and their implications for future merger initiatives, the Jeffords Center designed a case study to document the process and preliminary outcomes of these first mergers to be implemented under Act 153. The study plan was reviewed and approved by the University of Vermont’s Committee on Human Research.

*Methodology*

The study methodology consisted of a series of qualitative telephone interviews. Potential participants were initially identified as professionals that had previously or were currently involved in the Mountain Towns RED creation and/or the RSSU/WSWU merger, including state and local officials, board members, and consultants (n = 8), for a total pool of 15 individuals. Interviewed participants were asked to identify additional individuals who might be able to contribute their experiences (n = 7). Potential participants were initially contacted by email, with

telephone follow-up calls. One person declined to be interviewed, and six could not be interviewed within the available time. Eight individuals were interviewed by telephone (53%).

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The interviews consisted of six semi-structured and open-ended questions including: 1) Tell me what happened. 2) What did not happen, what was missed? 3) Knowing what you know now, what should have happened? 4) What now? Moving forward, what can we anticipate? 5) Is there anything else that you have not shared that you would like to? 6) Who else might you suggest we speak to?

While responding to each of the questions, the participants were asked to keep in mind the priorities of Act 153, specifically its intended impacts on educational opportunities and efficiencies realized (cost savings). The interviews were recorded and summarized; major findings are presented below. Because the creation of the Mountain Towns RED occurred concurrently with the merger of the Rutland Windsor and Windsor Southwest SUs and involved many of the same individuals, we present our results in general terms. Some statements may be more applicable to one or the other of the two mergers, but we believe the findings and our conclusions are equally applicable to the creation of REDS as they are to the joining of SUs. Selected quotes are shown in sidebars below, corresponding to each narrative section of the report.

*Key Events*

During the course of the interviews the participants were asked to reflect on the processes leading up to and through the RED development and mergers. Several events provided markers as significant milestones that impacted the processes; these are outlined in the following table.

**Table 2. Timeline of key events**

| <b>Key Event</b>   | <b>Approximate Date</b> |
|--|-------------------------|
| Two decades of conversations around merging in the Chester / Ludlow area, including consideration of the Mountain Towns joining the Bennington-Rutland SU prior to the passage of Act 153. | 1989 – 2009             |
| Act 153 enacted  | January 2010            |
| Development and release of Template by the State Agency of Education   | August 2010             |
| Initial kickoff meetings to formalize the process defined by Act 153.  | September 2010          |
| Joint Agreement Committee formed for both SU boards  | January 2011            |
| Task Group (Planning Committee) established by both SU boards  | December 2010           |
| Formation of committees for transition and implementation  | August 2011             |
| Meetings for review and approval of draft documents and budgets  | August 2011 - Present   |
| Town Meeting election for Mountain Towns RED, advisory vote on SU merger   | March 2012              |
| Act 156 enacted  | May 2012                |
| Receipt of state funding incentives  | December 2012           |
| Launch of new educational agencies   | (Planned for July 2013) |

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*“The articles do not include metrics for measuring whether or not the projections for the plans have been reached... that kind of ‘how are we going to know if we succeeded’ questions don’t have to be answered in the actual plan.”*

*“One thing that might be missing in the process is a community level values clarification. A dialogue about what opportunities might be out there for kids, because when we work with the committees themselves and try to triangulate that with the community that’s where the breakdown occurs. When it gets to the community level it almost feels like a sales job rather than a dialogue.”*

#### *Challenges and how they were met*

The participants were unanimous in describing the merger process as lengthy, complex, and interpersonally challenging. For most, these challenges exceeded their expectations and their resolution was described as a significant accomplishment. Because no mergers had been previously completed under Act 153, there were numerous procedural challenges that had to be resolved “on the fly”.

Multiple participants pointed to the effectiveness and importance of the financial planning provided by consultants, and its role in demonstrating the feasibility of merging. Most importantly, there is little commonality of accounting and data management procedures across different districts and supervisory unions. The development of a statewide, common chart of accounts was mandated by Act 153 and is under development by the Agency of Education, but implementation has not yet occurred.

Considerable effort was needed to prepare financial projections using common metrics, but this effort resulted in forecasts that could be understood by all participants and was a critical component of the plan’s acceptance. As one participant put it, “Having one person do all the financials because different districts code things differently and assign different things to different line items... so that we’re comparing apples to apples.” Such planning is especially valuable for statewide review of the merger process, as it establishes a baseline that can be used for later evaluation.

There was also broad agreement among participants about the importance of leadership at multiple levels of the process. Although all described negotiations as challenging, a common theme was the importance of leaders who kept the dialogue going and worked to engage community members across a wide spectrum of personality styles and levels of engagement.

Finally, concerns about the potential loss of local control presented serious challenges to smaller communities who risked losing representation without sufficient board representation. The solution, adoption of a 60% majority vote for employment of the Superintendent and the annual budget in the Two Rivers SU, made it possible for these board members to have a meaningful voice in representing their communities.

*“Another thing that was unique, that created clear sailing for passage was that no one would lose high school choice as result of the merger, as all the towns were part of Flood Brook. There was no loss of high school choice and no need to fear school closure.”*

*“It requires people to lead the process whose force of personality, style, wisdom, kindness, have to inspire others ... this is education, everything is fraught with process. You need a visionary leader to make it happen”*

*“It boils down to the people ...over and over being committed, being honest, straight forward, caring about the impact that its having on other people and having really good skills at moving this type of conversation forward.”*

*“The board members are being great about being cooperative, flexible and thoughtful. Some financial surprises are not as good as people hoped, but the general spirit is that we’re in this together, we’re going to get this done and we’re going to make it a really great SU.”*

**Table 3. Challenges and how they were met**

| Challenges  | How they were met  |
|---|--|
| Differing interpretations of laws   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation and collaboration between boards and Vermont Agency of Education</li> </ul>  |
| Inconsistent documentation/coding of financial data   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial analysts worked to place financials on consistent frames of reference</li> </ul>  |
| Logistics of merger transitions regarding pre-existing commitments such as retirement and insurance contracts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funds had to be used to address these issues, representing unanticipated merger costs</li> </ul>  |
| Concerns of losing local control were a continuing focus of public discourse                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reiteration that schools would not close; no loss of school choice (Mountain Towns RED)</li> <li>• Use of language that did not include ‘merger;’ creation of new SU with unique name not related to either SU</li> <li>• Establish voting requirement of 60% majority for superintendent and budget (Two Rivers SU)</li> </ul> |
| Political climate impacting community discussion  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership focus on reinforcing dialogue rather than debate</li> <li>• Advisory votes in advance of merger proposals</li> </ul>   |

*Keys to success*

The interviews revealed a number of elements that participants believed were important for the success of the merger initiative, including personal leadership qualities, shared goals, and pre-existing conditions. Multiple participants commented on the unique situation of these initiatives, which is unlikely to be repeated in other communities. Specifically, the Mountain Town districts were all members of the Flood Brook Union Elementary School and all districts offered high school, so there was no threat of school closure and no challenges regarding the transfer of real estate. Several remarked on the value of framing the transition of SUs as the creation of a new unit (Two Rivers) as opposed to the smaller unit being subsumed under the larger one.

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*“If the question is, ‘Has Act 153 had a meaningful positive impact on simplifying and making more efficient education governance and improving student outcomes?’ From the state level I would say absolutely not. It’s been a tremendous amount of energy devoted to what has been a failed bunch of situations except for one shining example.”*

*“If we can save dollars per child that can be reinvested in local schools that will enhance education and because of saving we can do that, not because of the size of organization that there will be new opportunities.”*

*“As much as I come up against people who talk about local control and this piece and that piece... mandating unified reporting requirements, data requirements, you gain significant efficiencies there. I happen to think the only way to do some of that is to require it from the state down.”*

Additionally, a non-binding advisory vote was advanced during Town Meeting in the districts of Ludlow and Mt. Holley on the decision of the school boards to support the Two Rivers SU consolidation. This “straw vote” provided early evidence of public support, and demonstrated a commitment to public participation in the merger process.

**Table 4. Keys to success.**

| Keys to Success                                     |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Personal characteristics of key participants</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful, kind, adaptable, communication skills, leadership abilities</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Shared goals</i>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ease with which this happened may have been due to long term consideration of the issue over a period of years</li> <li>• Ability to leave baggage at the door</li> <li>• Wanted best outcomes for children</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Unique Conditions</i>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of template</li> <li>• No loss of school choice</li> <li>• No schools to close</li> <li>• Balance of power with two SUs</li> <li>• Transfer of Mountain Towns to Bennington-Rutland SU— many students were already attending schools there, so there was no threat to local control.</li> </ul> |

*Will the goals of Act 153 be met?*

Participants were optimistic that the predicted savings from merging SUs and districts would be substantial enough to justify the effort. However, they also noted that although not yet quantifiable, initial transition costs will be greater than expected, and some time will be required before the maximum potential financial savings are realized. For example, liability insurance coverage had to be retained for several years after the closure of the old SUs, a cost that was not anticipated in the planning study.

The overall annual savings for the merging of SUs was substantial but less than originally projected due to redeployment of some savings for educational purposes. The originally projected annual savings included \$481,379 from the merger creating the Two Rivers SU, \$158,381 from the creation of the Mountain Towns RED, and \$63,671 at the Bennington Rutland SU, for a total savings of \$703,431.

Although final figures are not yet available for actual impacts at the Mountain Towns RED and Bennington Rutland SU, participants described expectations that some but not all of the projected savings would be realized in the initial years of the merger. Two Rivers SU Transition Board meeting minutes indicate continuing discussions concerning variable levels of savings across districts<sup>4</sup> and in total.<sup>5</sup> The role of grant funding has been a particular challenge to budget forecasting. For example, IDEA-B funding can fluctuate substantially over time. The Two Rivers projections included carryover amounts of unused IDEA-B funds, which although available for FY 2014 may impact the amount of available funding in future years. The extent and particular uses of grant funding across districts is likely to be an important factor determining financial outcomes, and should be thoroughly analyzed in advance of a planned merger. At the current time, financial outcomes are still a moving target and it would be premature to include specific savings estimates for the new SU and RED in this report. As one participant noted, **the expansion of educational opportunity can be accomplished most directly by redirecting cost savings to that purpose.** Our understanding is that savings are already being redirected but the specific amount is not yet available. It remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient political will for this redirection to continue in the long run.

With respect to educational opportunity, there was little participants could say about likely outcomes at this early stage of the process. Projected benefits described in Planning Committee notes<sup>6</sup> include improved professional development for teachers, expanded afterschool activities, more comprehensive special education services, better use of assessment data, improved technology infrastructure, more efficient use of instructor time, better coordination with the technical centers, and faster implementation of the Common Core curriculum. Educational opportunity gains anticipated from the RED merger include elementary curriculum alignment to the Burr and Burton High School most students already attend, increased curricular opportunities, and preservation of school choice. The definition of educational opportunity, sometimes referred to as Opportunities to Learn (OTL), can be a complex undertaking. In a recent report to the Vermont Legislature<sup>7</sup> the Jeffords Center found that opportunity is not systematically measured at the state level, but such measurement is urgently needed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of state policies. The Center also found that opportunities to learn as measured by a student questionnaire, teacher salaries, and access to higher level mathematics courses are not equitably distributed to all students across all school districts. The Center concluded that the lack of equity in opportunity to learn has implications for school mergers because some opportunities are probably not feasibly available across all districts as currently organized.

Although participants were optimistic about the success of the new SU and RED, the most commonly voiced sentiment was that voluntary mergers are unlikely to proceed in many other parts of the state given the scope of the challenges that were experienced even under favorable conditions. Building trust among all participating districts is critical, and planning must address

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rwsu.net/RWSU/Minutes/TwoRiversSU/120612.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rwsu.net/RWSU/Minutes/TwoRiversSU/111512.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rwsu.net/RWSU/RWSU-WSWSU/EducationalImpacts.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Meyers, H.W. & Rogers, J.D. (2013). Full Report: Educational Opportunities Working Group on Aligning Funding, Opportunities to Learn and Outcomes of the Educational System. Report Submitted to the Vermont Legislature. Burlington, VT: James M. Jeffords Center.

the current and historical political issues between and among all of the communities involved. The experiences of the Mountain Towns RED and Two Rivers SU may demonstrate the feasibility of merging and, we hope, can provide useful guidance for those communities that find the potential benefits to outweigh the procedural challenges.

#### *Recommendations and Local Policy Implications*

The participants described a variety of ideas and recommendations for future merger initiatives. These ranged from specific policy recommendations to more general concepts that may be helpful for those involved in future mergers. The following recommendations represent the positions of the Jeffords Center as well as the statements of participants. Despite considerable skepticism about the likelihood of future voluntary mergers moving forward in Vermont, the initial success of these first mergers under Act 153 provides valuable information for districts and SUs that are still considering mergers.

#### *Issues and recommendations for local planning and implementation*

- Effective, inclusive and committed leadership is essential to the successful merging of school districts or SUs.
- The potential loss for local control is always a concern when mergers are discussed. However, the loss of local control is balanced by real benefits, such as an improved educational experience, and increased accountability at the state and federal levels.
- Merger plans should include clear benchmarks that will allow quantitative evaluation of outcomes using metrics consistent with the entire state, in terms of both educational opportunity and cost savings. Merger plans should also include specific goals for balancing cost savings versus redirection of funds towards improvement of educational opportunities. Analysis of current offerings of opportunities to learn should be described in terms that enable comparison with other districts.
- Imbalances of power between merging communities could be a continuing challenge and may need solutions beyond the 60% super majority for employment of the Superintendent and annual budget voting requirement.
- There may be reluctance to describe the benefits of mergers in terms of financial efficiencies, but realized efficiencies are directly linked to the ability of a local educational authority to improve educational opportunities for students.

#### **General Conclusions and State Policy Recommendations**

Implementation of voluntary mergers has continued to be problematic. In all but one of five cases in which RED creation has been attempted, the propositions have been rejected by voters. In our interviews there was a strong consensus that voluntary mergers are unlikely to be successful in Vermont on a large scale. The success in the case of the Mountain Towns RED was believed to be due to a combination of unique circumstances that maximized incentives and minimized costs. Implications for state policy include:

- Additional research is needed to better understand community opinions of the merger process and the level of support for mergers in specific communities as well as alternatives at the state level for reducing the number of districts and supervisory unions

in the state of Vermont. If the Legislature wishes the public to support a reduction of the number of supervisory unions and school districts, a more in-depth study should be initiated to identify the solutions that will receive sufficient public support to be implemented on a meaningful scale.

- Even with careful planning it is likely that merger implementation will continue to be more challenging than anticipated. Realistic and accurate budgeting is essential, and a two year timetable would be preferable to the one year allocated for the Mountain Towns RED and Two Rivers SU. Substantial technical assistance from the state should be continued in future mergers, as the challenges that emerge are likely to be unique to the specific communities involved.
- Financial projections should take account of impacts at the district level, and should be formally evaluated on an annual basis for at least two years after implementation. The role and usage of grant funding at the district level should be thoroughly analyzed before and after a merger.
- Effective measurement of educational opportunities and the implementation of the Common Core standards is needed across all Vermont schools. The primary goal of Act 153 is to improve educational opportunity, and evaluation of its success is only possible if these data are measured and reported on a regular basis<sup>8</sup>.

As noted previously, the Jeffords Center recently found that educational opportunity is quite variable across Vermont. There are good reasons to believe that voluntary mergers will increase opportunities for students in the districts and supervisory unions where they occur. However, the state policy should be to expand opportunities for all students. In the implementation of Vermont's Strategic Plan for education,<sup>9</sup> two key policy strategies are to (2) "Promote and assist in the development of school district governance structures that serve to substantially improve education quality, expand learning options, increase education equity and improve overall efficiencies;" and (3) Establish a statewide system of support for supervisory unions and schools to ensure each learner has equitable access to high-quality 21<sup>st</sup> Century practices and environments. The implementation of Act 153 demonstrates the state's commitment to the first of these strategies, but greater attention is needed to the second goal. At what point would the state's investment in merger incentives be better employed towards policies that support all supervisory unions and schools in Vermont?

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<sup>8</sup> Meyers, H.W. & Rogers, J.D. (2013). Full Report: Educational Opportunities Working Group on Aligning Funding, Opportunities to Learn and Outcomes of the Educational System. Report Submitted to the Vermont Legislature. Burlington, VT: James M. Jeffords Center.

<sup>9</sup> [http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/board/educ\\_sbe\\_strategic\\_plan.pdf](http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/board/educ_sbe_strategic_plan.pdf)

## **Appendix: Survey Proposal and Draft Questionnaire**

### **PROPOSAL: Community Responses to School District Merger Proposals**

We propose polling of Vermont voters in communities where local school boards have voted to undertake studies towards eventual voluntary school district mergers under Act 153. Pre-election polling can identify the degree of support for a merger proposal, the proposal elements that are most attractive to voters, and the key objections that boards must address in order to obtain public support. Given the challenges that have emerged for merger initiatives to date, we also recommend consideration of a statewide survey to assess the degree of support for emerging alternatives to the voluntary merger system. Following the proposal, we present a draft questionnaire developed by students in a Survey Methods course at UVM.

The primary questions to be answered are:

- How much support exists across in specific communities for voluntary school district mergers?
- What must a particular merger proposal contain in order to obtain the support of the electorate?
- What aspects of a particular merger proposal are unacceptable to voters?

### ***Legislative Context***

In order to provide the same opportunities to learn that are present in large districts to more students who attend small districts, and to achieve economies of scale for reduced costs, in 2009 Vermont passed Act 153 to encourage voluntary school district mergers. Act 153 also contains provisions for “virtual mergers” of certain support services such as special education and transportation. Although a substantial number of supervisory unions (SU) initiated studies and several were put before voters, only one merger proposal has succeeded to date (the Mountain Towns Regional Education District), while three have been defeated. In early 2012, additional legislation was passed to further encourage districts to merge. Act 156 provided for additional transition funding as an incentive, increased the range of options for structuring voluntary mergers, and allowed for the creation of a “Modified Unified Union School District” so that mergers can proceed without towns that do not want to participate. Panels were established to (a) study SU size and structure in order to design a system to reduce the number of SUs and Supervisory Districts; and (b) to review and evaluate the allocation of resources for the promotion of educational opportunities throughout the state (the Jeffords Center is currently engaged in this latter initiative).

Because merger decisions as well as school budgets are ultimately decided by the electorate, there is an urgent need for the coming policy decisions to be informed by public

opinion on the issues of education finance and governance. For example, in an exit poll of voters in the unsuccessful Chittenden East merger election in June 2011, we found that only 19% of voters cited “increase educational opportunities” as the most important benefit of merging. If new merger proposals and new legislative initiatives are to succeed, a more convincing case must be presented to voters. Currently there are at least eight supervisory unions conducting RED studies, each of which may be decided by a public election. Each proposal represents a substantial investment of public resources. Preliminary polling would help districts and supervisory unions to maximize the likelihood of success while limiting the expenditure of resource on proposals that are not viable.

### ***Proposed Survey of Voters***

To better understand the opinions, perceptions, and actions of voters as they consider new initiatives, we propose representative scientific surveys of Vermont communities where merger proposals are being considered. We envision telephone surveys based on lists of registered voters, with samples of 300-400 respondents per supervisory union depending on population (at least 100 interviews are recommended for each participating community). The surveys will be very brief, requiring no more than 5 minutes from respondents. To maximize the utility of the results, the data should be collected early enough to be reported and acted on in advance of local elections.

We propose to conduct these surveys as a collaboration between The ***James M. Jeffords Center at the University of Vermont*** and the ***Castleton Polling Institute at Castleton State College*** (descriptions attached). These two organizations are uniquely qualified to design and carry out a timely, unbiased and professional survey that will allow key policy decisions to be directly informed by the concerns of voters. In addition to in-kind contributions planned by the Jeffords Center, we have an opportunity to include participation by students in an advanced graduate course in survey methods at UVM (taught by Kieran Killeen, PhD, who is also a faculty expert in education finance). An early start will guarantee valuable contributions by this class, which includes education professionals from across the state.

The cost of polling will vary across communities but is estimated at approximately \$12,000 for each survey or \$44,000 for a statewide survey. We are investigating the potential for cost savings if the same questions and methods can be repeated across communities. With multiple participating communities, the cost of developing questions, programming, and report development could be shared, reducing the per-survey costs by as much as \$4,000.

***The James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research***

The James M. Jeffords Center was founded in 2007 with a mission of support for policy development in the areas of education, health care, the environment and good government. Located at the University of Vermont, the Center is named to honor former United States Senator James M. Jeffords for his long and distinguished service to Vermont and the nation. Throughout his long Senate career, Jim Jeffords championed policy issues in education, the environment, and healthcare. The Jeffords Center at UVM seeks to honor Senator Jeffords' service to Vermont and the nation by providing independent research and evaluation services for state and local governments, private agencies and academic institutions. The Jeffords Center at UVM provides a gateway to bring together interdisciplinary programs and scholars, and collaborates with academic leaders, administrators, students, and policy makers to assess and support the development of policies and practices that lead to positive outcomes to our nation's challenges. Further information may be found at <http://www.uvm.edu/~jeffords>.

The Jeffords Center is led by Director H.W. "Bud" Meyers, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education. During his tenure at UVM he has taught quantitative methods, directed several grant programs and served as Chair for the Department of Education. While on leave from the University from 2000-2004, he served as Deputy Commissioner of Education for Vermont where he directed the development of the New England Common Assessment program. Working with Meyers is Associate Director John D. Rogers, Ph.D., who will be responsible for oversight of project operations. Rogers was previously Associate Director at the Public Research Institute, San Francisco State University, where he supervised operations and the development of new research and evaluation projects. Dr. Rogers received his Ph.D. in Social Psychology in 1999 from the University of California, Berkeley.

***The Castleton Polling Institute***

The Castleton Polling Institute was founded in 2011. It has quickly become a valued source of unbiased polling data on political and policy issues in Vermont, with survey results reported by national and local news media. The Institute recently worked with the Governor's Irene Recovery taskforce to collect data from farmers affected by the tropical storm, and is now working with the Governor's Taskforce for the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence on a survey to better understand male attitudes about issues related to domestic and sexual violence.

The Castleton Polling Institute is directed by Richard Clark, PhD. Before taking the position at Castleton, Clark ran the Survey Research and Evaluation Unit at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. In his 10 years at the University of Georgia, Clark conducted numerous public opinion polls and citizen satisfaction surveys for state, local, and national clients. After completing his doctoral program in Political Science at the University of Connecticut (1998), he served as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Connecticut where he taught in the Master's of Survey Research Program and in the Department

James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research

of Political Science. Clark has served as President of the Southern Association for Public Opinion Research (2007-08), written articles, and regularly presents his research at national conferences focusing on public opinion and survey research methodology.

James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research

Vermonters' Perceptions of School Mergers and Related Educational Finance Issues:

Draft Survey Questionnaire

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### **What's the purpose and objective(s) of the project?**

The goal of this project is to better understand the opinions and perceptions of voters in Vermont as the question of statewide school district merger is considered.

Specifically, the survey instrument has been developed to gauge the following topics:

- Basic demographic information.
- Views supporting school district merger
- Views opposing school district merger
- Views on whether educational opportunities will be improved or not
- Views on whether educational costs will be reduced or not
- Concerns about the loss of local control
- School closure

### **Why is it important to study this topic?**

It is important to study the topic of school district mergers in Vermont for four main reasons:

1. The Vermont Legislature has addressed school district mergers during the past two legislative sessions. In Act 156 the legislature included a provision to complete a study of supervisory union size and structure. The centerpiece of Act 153, enacted in 2010, is the voluntary merger of school districts.
2. The Secretary and past Commissioners of the Vermont Agency of Education, Armando Vilaseca (under Governor Peter Shumlin) and Richard Cate (under Governor James Douglas) have publicly stated that school district mergers and consolidations should be considered in Vermont.
3. To improve educational opportunities.
4. The potential for significant cost savings as documented below:

These questions have been at the forefront of education policy consideration for many years, including recent attention by the Commissioner of Education. Commissioner Vilaseca told the *Barre-Montpelier Times Argus* in March, 2012 that “Consolidating Vermont's 281 school districts into 50 or fewer governance entities estimates a saving of \$15 million to \$17 million in fiscal year 2012. ....Increasing staff-to-student ratios from the current 4.55-to-1 to 4.95-to-1 for fiscal year 2012 will generate \$46 million in annual savings.”

In addition to measuring the fiscal ramifications of mergers, key areas of interest for this survey research also includes loss of local control, improving efficiencies, the re-examination of a 100-

year old policy and changing demographics highlighted by a precipitous drop in the number of high school graduates in New England.

Vilaseca noted in a recent interview that student enrollment is at one of the lowest points in decades down to 89,000 from a high of 106,000. He also noted that Vermont has 277 districts and school boards, many of which operate schools with fewer than 100 students. The state spent approximately \$17,447 per pupil in 2010-2011, third highest amount in the U.S.

Further, Vermont's student-teacher ratio is substantially lower than the national average at 9.8 students per teacher (and is one of the lowest in decades).<sup>10</sup>

Past Commissioner Richard Cate released a white paper in 2006 encouraging a dialogue about school district mergers for the following reasons: (1) Quality of education; (2) Cost of education; (3) Decline in student enrollment; and (4) Short supply of school leaders. He points out that school district mergers has worked in other states and that Vermont should not pursue this goal because other states have done it, but to illustrate that it could be done. The White Paper reiterates that it should be considered with a focus first on students and second on efficiency.<sup>11</sup>

### **What has been studied previously and with what populations?**

School district mergers represent one of the most dramatic changes in education governance and management in the United States in the last 100 years. Over 100,000 school districts have been eliminated through mergers since 1938, a drop of almost 90 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.<sup>12</sup> The trend continues throughout the country largely because mergers are widely regarded as a way for school districts to cut costs.<sup>13</sup>

Studies have measured cost savings resulting from consolidation including one based on school districts in New York that showed that by doubling enrollment operating per pupil costs were cut by 61.7 percent for a 300-pupil district and by 49.6 percent for a 1,500 pupil district.<sup>14</sup> The James M. Jeffords Center and the Vermont Legislative Research Service conducted an exit poll in 2011 of residents in the Chittenden East Supervisory Union. This exit poll documented the opinions of voters, who ultimately rejected a merger. Although each community will have its own variation on the themes of local control, the prospect of tax increases, and the broader implications for public finances, the Jeffords Center concluded that communities with strong attachment to their local school districts will not be easily convinced on financial grounds.

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<sup>10</sup> Rogers, J. (2011) Can Voluntary School District Mergers Succeed? James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research Issue Brief Vol. 1, No. 2

<sup>11</sup> Rogers, J. (2011) Can Voluntary School District Mergers Succeed? James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research Issue Brief Vol. 1, No. 2

<sup>12</sup> Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2001) *Does School District Consolidation Cut Costs?* New York: Center for Policy Research, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University

<sup>13</sup> Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2001) *Does School District Consolidation Cut Costs?* New York: Center for Policy Research, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University

<sup>14</sup> Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2007) "Does School District Consolidation Cut Costs?" *Education Finance and Policy* 2 (4) (Fall): 341-375.

The Jeffords study also found that when a local school and district represent the core of a community's identity, merger proposals need to offer an alternative that is either more compelling, or one that preserves the values that local control of schools represents to voters in communities like Huntington.<sup>15</sup>

### **What research questions are guiding this project?**

Research questions will focus on measuring the level of support that exists across the state for voluntary school district mergers. Other key questions include identifying the most important voter concerns about mergers such as potential loss of local control, closure of small schools, and concern that educational opportunities will not be improved. The study also seeks to learn what benefits voters attribute to mergers, if voters believe their schools offer adequate and equitable educational opportunities, and voters' views on educational costs.

This preliminary draft telephone survey questionnaire is designed to elicit answers to the above questions, which will be representative of all voters in Vermont; including those in small as well as large school districts. Another purpose of this exercise is to learn if voters need more information in order to make an informed decision about mergers. Details of the survey's context are not specified, as important issues such as sample design have not yet been established. The draft is meant as a starting point; additional revision will be needed to ensure that it addresses emerging questions and priorities.

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<sup>15</sup> Rogers, J. (2011) Can Voluntary School District Mergers Succeed? James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research Issue Brief Vol. 1, No. 2

**A. Gauging support for voluntary school district mergers**

1) Was there an election or vote in your district recently about school mergers?

Yes

No [SKIP TO 2]

[IF YES]

a) Did you vote in that election?

Yes

No

b) Did you vote in support of school mergers?

Yes

No

2) If there was a vote in your district, how likely would you be to vote in favor of a voluntary school district merger?

Very likely

Likely

Not likely

Not sure

3) Do you believe the majority of people in your community would support school district merger?

Very likely

Likely

Not likely

Not sure

4) Do you believe your community would benefit from school district merger?

Very likely

Likely

Not likely

Not sure

**B. Current Local School Conditions**

For the purposes of this section, “educational opportunities” includes all educational, extracurricular activities, and electives.

5. How satisfied are you with the educational opportunities offered in your school district?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Unsatisfied
- Very unsatisfied
- Unsure

6. Do you believe the educational opportunities in your district will change if your school district votes for merger?

- Yes
- No [SKIP TO 7]
- Not sure

[IF YES]

a) How do you think these will change?

- Increased educational opportunities
- Decreased educational opportunities
- Not sure

7. Do schools in your school district prepare students well enough to start a career or go to college?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**C. Understanding About Costs, Upsides and Downsides**

8. Do you think school district merger would lead to lower taxes in your town?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

9. The State Agency of Education has outlined a series of financial incentives to encourage school district merger (e.g. consulting fee reimbursements, transition incentive grants, etc.).

If your school district was part of a merger, do you believe your local school district would benefit from any of those incentives?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

10. In the case of school district merger, do you think financial spending by the school district in each of the following categories would increase, decrease, or remain the same?

|                                       | Increase | Decrease | Remain the same | Don't Know |
|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------------|------------|
| Transportation                        | 1        | 2        | 3               | 9          |
| Teachers                              | 1        | 2        | 3               | 9          |
| Administration                        | 1        | 2        | 3               | 9          |
| Infrastructure, buildings and grounds | 1        | 2        | 3               | 9          |
| Technology                            | 1        | 2        | 3               | 9          |

11. Do you believe that school district mergers would lead to layoffs?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

12. Do you believe that school district mergers would make educational systems more efficient?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

13. How important are each of the following potential benefits of school district mergers for your community?

|                                      | Very important | Somewhat important | Not very important | Not at all important | Don't Know |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Saving money                         | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Increasing educational opportunities | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Enhancing the quality of education   | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Other (Specify)                      | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |

**D. Concerns about Mergers**

14. Do you need more information about ACT 153 and school district mergers in order to make an informed decision?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

15. How important are each of the following potential liabilities of school district mergers for your community?

|                               | Very important | Somewhat important | Not very important | Not at all important | Don't Know |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Increased class size          | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Increased costs               | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Loss of local control         | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Increased transportation time | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Reduced sense of community    | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |
| Other (Specify)               | 1              | 2                  | 3                  | 4                    | 9          |

16. Do you think the state should impose mandatory school district mergers if the current system of voluntary mergers does not achieve its goals of improving educational opportunities and creating cost efficiencies in Vermont?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

17. Is there anything else you would like to say about the implementation of school district mergers in Vermont? (Open ended; record verbatim and probe with “What do you think would be the best alternative to the current system?”) \_\_\_\_\_

**E. Demographic Questions**

18. What is the zip code where you live? \_\_\_\_\_

19. In what city/town do you live? \_\_\_\_\_

20. Are you male or female?

Female  
Male

21. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic or Latino?

Yes  
No

22. Which of the following best describes you? (Select all that apply)

American Indian or Alaska Native  
Asian  
Black or African American  
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander  
White

23. What is your age in years as of today? Please stop me when I get to the right category.

18-25  
26-45  
46-60  
61+

24. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Some High School  
High School Diploma  
Some College  
2 Year College Degree  
4 Year College Degree.  
Some Graduate School  
Graduate or Professional Degree

25. Do you have any children that attend public elementary or secondary school?

Yes  
No

26. What was your total household income before taxes during 2011? Please stop me when I get to the correct category (read all).

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more