

Dear South Burlington School Board:

As one of the educators who dedicated time, energy, and expertise to the Task Force, I would like to humbly submit for the record that I join the Superintendent and Board Chair in supporting a unified elementary school in South Burlington. This is often referred to as "Option Five."

I base my recommendation in large part on my Task Force work. The educators on the Task Force made repeated references to the educational benefits of all options. We talked in detail about the benefits of increased preK-4/5 unification, benefits that would positively impact our preK-12 system as a whole:

- Vertical and horizontal curricular articulation
- Data-based improvements using common internal/external assessment practices and action planning
- Ease of collaboration for classroom teachers, special educators, unified arts teachers, and others
- Increased equity of access to school-day programming
- Increased equity of access to after-school programming
- Increased pre-K opportunities
- Coalescence of social capital to benefit all South Burlington students
- Programmatic expansion and improvements (i.e., preK-12 world language and increased preK-5 STEM and visual/performing arts)
- Extended school day
- Extended school-year programming
- Efficiency, and more.

I recognize that suggesting changes to a system that works for so many children and families feels like a risky proposition. I acknowledge increased unification will present challenges that perhaps do not exist under the current structure. However, I not only believe that the opportunities outweigh the challenges but that the challenges are surmountable.

I further believe the educational rewards for our children and community far exceed the actual and perceived risk. In a high-performing district like South Burlington, change is hard, and the status quo is alluring. In my experience making a change that places all students at the center of the effort quickly becomes a new tradition and an additional point of pride in South Burlington. We are a district that strikes an amazing balance between tradition and innovation – and we have always placed all students' needs at the center of our decisions.

My opinion is not based on the viability or possible benefits of City Center. I do acknowledge that city leaders and voters have supported a TIFF district and that progress in the City Center **may** help mitigate the district's unavoidable new school construction costs. I also accept that long-identified community needs **may** be addressed by the TIFF and City Center (e.g., city hall, community library, etc.). Still, as an educator, I am not filtering my opinion about master

planning through any lens other than what Option Five would mean for the children, schools, and the educational community of South Burlington.

I understand the feelings of those who are reluctant to support Option Five. I did not enter my time on the Task Force with a fully developed opinion of preK-4/5 unification. Rather, I listened to the opinions of the unbiased experts who were asked to present to our group. I respected Frank Locker as the expert in educational design and in visioning that he is; I fully accepted his caution regarding the perils of redistricting. I listened as a credentialed demographer presented factual information about the city's population. I gave these professionals the respect their degrees, experience, and credentials warranted. I also challenged their thinking when the situation called for it, and I asked questions when I didn't understand.

While on the Task Force I did not accept every piece of information put before me as an absolute fact, and I dismissed what I believed to be false urgency when a developer made a presentation – and perhaps a proposal -- to the community via our group and via advertisements in local media. I offered educational insights and raised concerns about many elements of the developer's proposal involving school construction and configuration.

As high school principal I stepped out of my role and filtered educational issues with an eye on students younger than the 9-12 grade level. I also ate a ton of Subway sandwiches.

We all know social and socio-economic stratification exists in our city. I don't always understand from where this comes, and I do not routinely see this sentiment outwardly permeate the attitudes or dispositions of my students. I do believe that students and families are impacted by the social and educational stratification, and I believe it starts in our preK-5 schools. How bad is this stratification? It certainly depends on whom you ask. Could we make this situation better? I absolutely believe we can.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge that other issues exist regarding master planning in South Burlington. Unfortunately our community is sitting on facilities that were built in the same era, and all are to some degree in need of modification, renovation, or replacement.

The high school is currently preparing for a 2018 re-accreditation visit from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). As part of our self-study we will be reviewing our facility in relation to NEASC community resources and facility standards. We will start this process by looking at a NEASC report that is over ten years old. In that time period we've chosen not to prioritize the addressing of some of the Association's recommendations. Now the high school faces an increasing number of facility-related issues -- some perhaps more pressing than those the report identified. These needs center around modifying a fifty-year-old facility to increase equitable access, replace worn-out materials, and support teaching and learning now and into the future.

As you know, we have discovered the significant and unforeseen costs required to make even minor renovations to SBHS (e.g., window replacement, ADA compliance, elevator

refurbishment, cafeteria renovations). Regardless of the outcome of this discussion, investments in the high school are certainly looming, and a rebuild versus remodel cost-benefit analysis is needed.

Infrastructure issues are not unique to South Burlington nor to Vermont. Across New England and the United States communities are dealing with stressed and obsolete public and private facilities. While South Burlington has been moderately insulated, Vermont and New England are now facing the long-predicted, post-Boomer decline in population. If only fewer people (and fewer children) suddenly made old facilities new again!

In closing, at moments I long to travel back in time and listen to the conversations that led to the visionary planning and building of SBHS, Tuttle, and even the three elementary schools. The community leaders who advanced these decisions in many ways established the unifying civic pride we all feel today, the South Burlington civic pride so often expressed through our excellent schools. We are now standing on the shoulders of those leaders, and our current and future students deserve our courage, collaboration, and commitment as much as yesterday's did.

My sincere thanks to you for your work on this effort. As your high school principal I commit to tirelessly support whatever the outcome of this discussion.

Patrick Burke
Principal