

# Memorandum

**From:** Patrick Leduc, South Burlington School Board Chair

**Date:** 9/11/2016

**Re:** Statement of Position on SBSB Master planning – School Consolidation

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We have had access to a lot of information, opinions and research related to the direction of our district's schools prior to and since my time on the Board. This is a complex and vitally important decision for our district and community that everyone involved – Board members, Administration, educators, parents/guardians, and the community at large have contributed to. I know that I have learned a lot from the input of the community, reports from the task force and administration, and the subcommittees of the Board. I am proud and humbled to be part of such an engaged, passionate, and thoughtful community.

That engagement and involvement is because we all know how important an excellent education is for our youth – the future workers, business owners, creators and leaders in our community.

I believe that education is the rising tide that lifts all boats – it is the reason I am involved in the work I do, it is why I have been involved in mentoring and the creation of scholarships, and it is why I ran for election to the School board. It is the lens that I look through when I offer my thoughts on what is the best path for our district. What is the best option to provide educational opportunities for our students? How can we position ourselves and our schools to be at the for-front of instructional practices to inspire and educate our students?

Our district has a proud tradition of offering excellent programming. In a world that is evolving so quickly – where the skills needed tomorrow are drastically different than the skills needed in the past we have an opportunity right now to ask ourselves – are we positioned to continue that proud tradition? This question is larger than just the physical space but clearly includes that space, that environment that we place our children in.

Coming through this ongoing process of discovery and learning I leave with a vision for our district that includes an investment in what we've come to refer to as 21<sup>st</sup> century learning opportunities. I envision a school and education approach that is flexible and evolving. Just as we see learning as a never ending process for ourselves and our children- the practice of how we educate continues to evolve as well. A 21<sup>st</sup> century approach would leverage increased teacher collaboration, the use of small and large student work groups - designed to allow for increased participation, and deeper student engagement. A place where we can teach in small quiet spaces and spark student's interests through student centric and varied opportunities in

larger shared spaces. A flexible approach and a flexible space allows us to have both small quiet classroom work and larger non-tradition approaches – with an outcome that allows us to serve all learners better.

I am convinced that this kind of environment will help prepare our youngest students for the rigors and opportunities of middle and high school. As we all know – our students are now on a track to graduate with proficiency based graduation requirements starting in the year 2020. Simply put – every opportunity we put in front of our youth today will allow them continued flexibility through their progression in the higher grades. I envision a district where students who are inspired to learn more deeply in a particular area of interest, even at the elementary school level, can use that foundation to more quickly and effectively show proficiency in the later grades allowing them to take advantage of other coursework, more advanced classes, Dual enrollment, and early college. I know that seems like a long ways away from elementary school, but the seeds – the excitement and the foundational learning, and love of learning is planted there.

We have now gathered experts from many areas to assess possible consolidation – The Task Force recommended the consolidation to either one or two elementary schools and the minority report recommended a two elementary school model. The Superintendent and his team of administrators recommended consolidation as well. This team, along with our educators are a big reason we have the educational success we've had over the years. Their expertise and experience carry significant weight with me.

The Education value is clear – The value that comes from 21<sup>st</sup> century learning spaces is well documented in the Board's subcommittee report and highlighted in the Superintendents proposal and the Task Force recommendation, the ability to increase academic opportunities in a consolidated structure will be of value to our students, we know that teacher collaboration will also be improved in a consolidated school and we've seen research showing how that has a positive impact on students. A single South Burlington wide cohort of students at the elementary level – like we have at the middle and high school level also has value in the form of equity, diversity, and in the ease of transitions to the next grade level.

A new consolidated elementary school would also improve safety for our students - a new structure would be constructed with some of the best practices in school safety including concepts that limit line of sight and approachability. For the students, parents, educators, and staff of Chamberlin, a new school farther away from the Airport and the often debated noise issues there would be put to bed.

The costs of implementing this physical structure is significant in one sense – best labeled as the sticker price but the most appropriate lens to view this from is the impact to our tax payers. As you will note by looking at the financial analysis - the costs of doing nothing and the cost of building a new school are forecast to be nearly the same to our taxpayers. There are many reasons for this, including background growth, the cost of maintenance on older buildings vs newer structures and the cost savings that come from consolidations. The chart<sup>1</sup> I have here represents this point. This is not new data – just a view at the same data we have already seen from a tax payer trend point of view.

That does not mean that there are not risks – indeed the annual budget that we will ask tax payers to vote on each year will have a higher % of “non-negotiable” costs that could not be changed (the debt

service). Conceptually a failed budget in that environment would position the administration and board with fewer options in what to cut – putting at risk program offerings.

In my estimation this is a consideration but today's operational budget is already tight – we have added or discussed adding educators due to class size issues in our three elementary schools - some of which would not be needed in a consolidated school , and 81% of our budget is currently allocated to staffing costs. As a result - if budget cuts had to be made today - I would find it hard to see a scenario where programs are not at risk.

So, with that I believe we have a positive educational value proposition – but there are also other factors that make this point in time one of significant value to our community.

First, there is current legislation that would forgive outstanding debt if we were to take action now. The South Burlington School District currently owes the state over 3.3 million dollars that per current legislation, would not need to be re-paid if sell these properties before 2020.

There is cost savings from a consolidation. In the twenty years that we've analyzed we estimate that there is over sixteen and a half million dollars in stewardship and operational cost reductions in scenario five compared to the status-quo. We also know that that during that period we'll not see those reductions flow directly into savings at the property tax level but in the years that follow we should be able to realize operational and stewardship cost savings. This is an investment in our future, our children's future. While twenty years out is difficult to forecast with any certainty - logic would dictate that we should see some of these reductions in operational and stewardship costs as savings. As a result we will have the opportunity to choose between investing those savings back into the school or reducing property taxes. In short, the trend line of scenario 1 will continue on its trajectory – while the trend line for option 5 (and option 4) should slow its growth by this investment.

Not for any one of these reasons but for the cumulative reasoning and value of all of them together I am in favor of option 5.

That being said, I do have some concerns and risks that I would want us to manage.

I would urge us to dig deeper into the capacity and demographics trends that have been highlighted by the subcommittee report. Challenges and/or alterations, if any, in this modeling are resolvable in the size and structure of the building we need to construct but we must be as confident as possible before we take any action.

I would want us to work very closely with the City Council to have a cohesive and actionable plan for the use of the displaced facilities with an eye towards revitalization of the communities they are in.

In the area of school size and Small Learning Communities within a larger single elementary school I would ask that further research and expertise be brought to bear and added to the school team. While I have great respect and faith in our teams at the administrative and educator level – they are all fully committed with their current allocations. If we are truly going to invest in a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning approach and obtain the full value of that educational approach and physical space we need some staff fully dedicated to its implementation.

## Taxes - Whole District \$366,000 House

