

The town of Warren and the Act 46 accelerated merger

As written in the Study committee report, each town in the WWSU values its culture and sense of uniqueness. Certainly, nowhere is this more true than in Warren. Our community cherishes our school and is so grateful for what it provides to our children. Families move here to raise their children because they can see that there is something special happening at our school. Warren finds itself at the table of study committee meetings because the state has offered significant tax incentives for an accelerated merger that we believe our tax payers have a right to vote on, not because we believe that a consolidated district is necessarily in the best interest of all of the children in our Supervisory Union. However, it should be understood that Act 46 is the law and the intent is to control statewide education spending. The short term financial benefits are clear the educational benefits, less so.

What are the advantages of choosing accelerated merger?

-Sharing the cost of our bond and deficit- Our school building is long overdue for much deferred maintenance. We will be voting on a \$2,550,000 bond for necessary repairs and replacements. In a unified district the cost of this bond will be shared over a much larger tax base greatly reducing the cost to each individual taxpayer. If Warren would take on the bond alone the tax on a \$300,000 home would increase from between \$124 and \$416 over a 20 year bond. In a consolidated district, it would increase from between \$10 and \$33 over a 20 year bond. Warren is also facing a \$200,000 deficit next year, the cost of which would, again, be shared in a merged district. You can find these and more financial projections on the Washington West Supervisory Union website at wwsu.org under the Act 46 tab/Study Committee Draft Reprt Appendix.

-Tax incentives- Beginning in the first year of operation, a reduction of the homestead property tax rate will be applied in the first 5 years in the following manner: \$.10/.08/.06/.04/.02. Also, the education tax rate is guaranteed to not increase for our towns by more than 5% for the first 5 years. Finally, there is a waiver on the cap for the Allowable Growth Penalty for FY 2018. So, the new board can fund the schools as needed with lower tax rates, no cap on spending and a guarantee that the education tax rate can not increase anyone's school taxes more that 5% each year for 5 years regardless of spending.

-Other Financial Incentives- One board, one budget would also contain some inherent savings including such things as: town treasurer services and expenses; board security expense; one audit instead of seven; board member dues/fees and expenses; board insurance; and the ability to fully earn the EEE grant all amounting to \$65,800 savings per year. There are also possible future cost savings that can't be financially determined yet, i.e. relocating the central offices to a space in Harwood; centralizing food services; contracting maintenance and operations and annual equipment costs.

-Primary School Choice- Parents could exercise intra-district primary school choice without any financial consequences for any one school.

-Class Size and Shared Staffing- Class sizes in all grades would be more homogenous. This is a bigger factor in our neighboring schools but we do have ebbs and flows in Warren. A unified school district can better manage the distribution of students, teachers and resources to compensate for an anomaly in one corner of the district.

-Learning Opportunities- We would be able to innovate the sharing and structuring of what we do now. New learning units and modules could be shared and rotated through schools avoiding the duplicate purchase of these materials. There could be a merger of the middle schools of Crosset Brook and Harwood allowing them to offer a more robust learning environment and greater opportunities for students of those grades. The study committee hopes that the cost sharing of the merger offers us the best chance of being able to afford the renovations and new program offerings that are needed at HUHS to be competitive in 21st century learning.

What are the challenges/concerns facing an accelerated merger?

-Are we losing local control? We may lose a certain measure of equity in education that our children have right now. For example, we are the only elementary school to have theater program. Would that theater program go away if it wasn't possible to have it at every school? Consolidation means we will not be setting our own budget. If we consolidate, Warren will have 2 elected representatives on a new district board of 14 that will be setting our new district wide budget. Also, there will be no more school board meeting at town meeting day. There will be strong encouragement for an advisory group that will advocate for the interests and needs of the Warren School and the residents of Warren to the new Unified District Board.

-Is there an ability to turn back once we accelerate? Once we decide to join the consolidated district there is no recourse. Certain options will be taken off of the table. For example, there will be no opportunity for exploring independence in lieu of the public school of Warren. The only way that we could be taken out of the newly formed union is by consent of every town and that will never happen.

-Are the educational/learning opportunities certain? Any savings will be reinvested in programs at the middle and high school levels as they need the most help right now, however, there is no general plan or strategy for improving services there so the effect of more spending is uncertain.

-Will our PTO and WASP programs be protected? Our PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) and our WASP (Warren After School Program) are both 501(c)3 entities and will be able to keep their status as such. All of the funds that are raised by either program will remain for use within the Warren School.

-What will happen if we do not vote for the accelerated merger?

- a. If our town votes no we will not be able to voluntarily join the newly merged district in the coming years if we change our minds. We would have to submit a new plan to the State Board of Education and hold another vote in Warren. All other towns would also have to vote on whether to allow us to join. We will also lose $\frac{1}{3}$ of the tax incentives (and so would all of the other towns) offered by the state if we do not join in the first year. There would still be a small amount of tax incentives offered if we attempt to join later but there would not be a big window of time to accomplish all of this before the 2019 deadline.
- b. The state will merge us anyway in July of 2019 and at that time will determine which district we fit best in as an elementary school without needing our input or consent.