

## **Master Planning and Visioning Personal Statement**

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**Full Version**

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Master Planning and Visioning was one of the key reasons that I decided to run for my seat on the school board last winter. The decisions we are making now will impact the quality of education for South Burlington's students for many years to come. I would like to thank all of the people in the community and outside of it who have worked so hard to gather the information and provide the feedback and opinions that we as a board have analyzed as we've each come to our own conclusions about what the district should do. I would also like to thank the community for bearing with us as we have worked to be diligent and thoughtful in following the process through to the end.

As I thought about the issues surrounding Master Planning and Visioning I divided them up into three key areas, all of which interact with one another:

1. Educational Quality
2. Financial Impact
3. Community Impact

### **Educational Quality**

In my mind, educational quality is of primary importance as we make decisions about the future of our schools. As a community, South Burlington is proud of its schools. They are a key reason people choose to live in our community, and they draw students who have the choice to attend any public school in Vermont. I believe that despite ongoing concerns about high tax rates, if the Board felt we needed to choose the most expensive option because it clearly provided the best education for our kids, the community could be convinced to support that option.

The administration and teachers are in the best position to provide information regarding the impact on educational quality of each option. The administration and teachers who have been part of the MPV process are convinced that there are real educational benefits to consolidation. The evidence for some form of consolidation seems to breakdown into 4 main categories.

1. Ease of administration – smoothing of enrollment, ability to keep class sizes small, equalizing workload amongst teachers and administrators, improved teacher collaboration
2. Additional learning opportunities – 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, languages and music, middle school opportunities for 5<sup>th</sup> graders, wider range of extracurricular activities for all
3. Equity of educational opportunities – diversity (racial and socioeconomic), equity of PTO programs and extracurricular activities
4. Impacts of outside pressures on our students – noise, traffic

**Ease of administration** – Consolidation in some form clearly makes administration of the elementary schools easier over the long term. Enrollment, which currently varies between schools and grades from year to year, could be somewhat smoothed out by consolidating schools down to 1 or 2. This would make it easier to ensure that class sizes remain within policy guidelines without having to hire additional

teachers, and in some scenarios could lead to the possible elimination of some classrooms, generating cost savings or freeing up resources to offer additional programs or keep tax rates from rising so quickly.

Workload could be balanced more effectively between administrators and between teachers at the different elementary schools under a consolidation scenario. We would eliminate the challenges that are currently faced by Chamberlin staff as they provide all the same programs with a smaller group of team members and fewer parents to support them (because enrollment is so much lower than Orchard or Central).

The administration claims that teacher collaboration would be improved because consolidation would allow more teachers to work in the same building. I have yet to see clear evidence that more teachers in the same building improves collaboration versus the environment created by being part of a smaller team with a smaller number of colleagues. The question that still remains in my mind is whether improvements in the ease of administration will actually lead to improved student outcomes and whether they outweigh some of the potentially negative aspects of consolidation from the educational quality perspective.

**Additional learning opportunities** – One of the biggest justifications for consolidation has been the need to incorporate “21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning” into our classrooms. The argument made by the administration is that we do not have 21<sup>st</sup> century spaces, so it is difficult to implement 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The argument continues that it would be much too expensive to retrofit existing spaces for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and so we need new spaces to accommodate it. Despite repeated requests, no one in the district has been able to provide the board with a vision for what 21<sup>st</sup> century learning looks like for our elementary students. In my opinion, the answers we have been given so far point to the importance of changes in curriculum and teaching methods more than major changes to buildings. With the work that has been completed on personalized learning plans and proficiency-based graduation requirements at the middle and high school levels, it appears that we are much further down the path at those schools in terms of defining the needs for upgrades and changes to spaces to accommodate new teaching and learning methods. Until a clearer vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning has been developed for the elementary schools, I cannot justify major expenditures to accommodate it at the elementary level. I believe that we can develop a plan to use the spaces we have to better incorporate some 21<sup>st</sup> century learning concepts at the elementary schools in the meantime.

A wider range of extracurricular activities would appear to be available to a larger group of students under some of the consolidation scenarios. In a larger school there could be a critical mass of students to participate in each of them and a big enough group of teachers and parents to support them. In two of the consolidation scenarios the 5<sup>th</sup> graders would gain access to the full range of middle school extracurricular activities because they would be moved to that campus. However, I think the extracurricular activities that have been developed at each of the elementary schools have grown from the interests of the students in those schools, and each school has access to a healthy number of them. I think the potential costs, monetary and non-monetary, of consolidation outweigh the marginal benefit of expanding the number of extracurricular offerings at the elementary level.

Another educational opportunity presented by the administration as part of the consolidation scenarios is the addition of world languages and music to the elementary educational offerings. I take objection to the idea that we cannot offer world languages or music unless we consolidate. I think these important offerings have been held out as a carrot to encourage parents to support consolidation. If we as a

community believe it is important for our kids to have these opportunities, we will find the money to make it happen in whichever configuration the elementary schools are in. Based on numbers provided by the administration and my own back of the envelope calculations:

- Offering languages and music in 3 elementary schools for 20 years = \$10.6 million
- Offering in 2 schools = \$8.3 million
- Offering in 1 school = \$4.5 million

However, in order to achieve consolidation you would have to layer in debt service. Option 3 results in net elementary debt service (debt service less operating cost savings) of -\$932K. Option 4 results in \$30.8 million of debt service, and Option 5 results in \$40.2 million of debt service.

Thinking about it another way, \$528,000 of a \$47 million budget is 1.1% versus 0.9% for two schools or 0.5% for 1 school (if you believe that one teacher can handle double the teaching load of the other two scenarios). If we wanted to make languages and music a priority we could do that with or without consolidation. My personal belief is that there is no greater 21<sup>st</sup> century skill than speaking a second or third language and that we should make this a priority going forward.

An additional educational benefit that has been discussed is that the 5<sup>th</sup> graders could have access to all middle school programs under options 3 and 5. The administration believes that the 6<sup>th</sup> graders would benefit from having the 5<sup>th</sup> graders in a “house” with them much the way the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders currently have a looping team that works with them over the course of 2 years. I can see some advantages to the 5<sup>th</sup> graders of moving to the middle school, but there are also significant downsides as discussed below. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade is working very well in our current model. Why should we change it? Despite some of the possible advantages, I still view the moving of the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to the middle school as a disappointing necessity in the case where we decide Option 3 or Option 5 is the option we need to choose for other reasons. Is there a way to better serve the 6<sup>th</sup> graders without moving the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to be in the same building with them?

**Equity** – The only point of inequity that has consistently been identified throughout the process is that Chamberlin’s PTO raises less money than Central’s or Orchard’s and thus Chamberlin students miss out on opportunities like the new playground at Central or additional technology in the classroom. First, I’m not sure that I’ve seen the quantification of the difference in the amount of funding to even understand how big an issue this really is. Second, there is a new and highly motivated team in charge of the PTO at Chamberlin who will be working to close the gap. Third, this seems like a problem that can be addressed at a central level. Beyond the PTO funding issue, it appears that all the major programs that are offered at each of the schools are the same.

One other point that is continually raised by the administration is that there is an imbalance in diversity amongst the schools and that this somehow leads to inequity. I feel the diversity argument for consolidating the schools is incoherent at best. If we smooth out diversity across the classrooms by having all the students in one school, some students will experience more diversity and some will experience less than they were previously. It is a zero sum game. If our least diverse school is at 16% students of color and our most is at 24% and we average every classroom out to 20%, we’re talking about a difference of 1-2 children of color per classroom more or less. (The spreadsheet we have been given to back up these numbers does not seem to match the numbers the administration quotes. That

spreadsheet says Chamberlin 25%/Central 25%/Orchard 27% if unclassified students are counted in diversity or Chamberlin 10%/Central 18%/Orchard 21% if unclassified students are excluded.)

Beyond that, I have a problem with the way diversity has been presented to date. The whole argument for balancing diversity amongst the schools seems to come from the perspective of white students. The argument seems to be that white students will benefit from having students of different races and backgrounds in their classrooms, so it can't be fair if there are different numbers in different classrooms. Students of color are not there to provide educational opportunities for white students. They are students like any other whom we are responsible for educating. As with students of different racial backgrounds, economically challenged students should not be viewed as learning opportunities that need to be spread around equally for everyone else's educational benefit. Children should not be reduced to their socioeconomic status or their race.

Overall, I remain unconvinced that we are providing inequitable educational opportunities to the students at our three different elementary schools. Are the experiences at each of the schools slightly different? – Yes. Are they in some significant way unequal? – No. Is it more challenging for the teachers and administrators at Chamberlin to provide the same number of opportunities for a smaller group of students with fewer staff and fewer parents/guardians (as a result of there being fewer students)? – Perhaps. Is that a convincing reason to close a high-performing neighborhood school and move those children to Central and Orchard? At this time I don't believe there is sufficient evidence to do so.

**Impact of Outside Pressures** – One concern expressed by many parties to the MPV discussion is that Chamberlin and Central face challenges as a result of their locations and the proposed development of their surrounding areas. All of the schools are going to continue to face outside pressures like noise and encroachment of the airport at Chamberlin and construction distractions as city center develops at Central. Of course noise is a concern at Chamberlin that is being studied in more detail, and the redevelopment of Market Street will have some impact on Central. However, closing those schools and moving the children into other schools (old or new) does not eliminate the pressures of development in South Burlington. For example, if we build a large new school at Oak Creek, the students in that school are going to face impacts from the continued development of the Southeast quadrant. We as a community have to determine what trade-offs we are willing to make with regard to development. Are we willing to close one or two or three of the highest-performing elementary schools in the state to clear the way for development that may or may not happen and over an unclear timeframe? Or will we work to mitigate the potential negative impacts of development on our schools and take advantage of some of the opportunities it brings?

**Potential Educational Challenges of Consolidation** – Throughout the discussion of consolidation, the administration and its consultants have down-played the potential educational challenges of consolidation. I and others have identified the following concerns, among others, which have not, in my opinion, been adequately addressed:

- Capacity – The data regarding enrollment trends are not yet clear. Information provided by the administration this week shows the elementary schools are 1.5% above the demographer's projections for 2017 (963 versus projections of 949) and up 2.0% over last year. As of two weeks ago, we were 3.7% above the projections. Last year we were 0.4% below the projections. The data simply are not clear yet regarding enrollment trends. If we cut off capacity now by closing

any of the schools, there will be significant disruption and cost to the district if enrollment holds steady or increases over time. If we closed Chamberlin today and assuming we were willing to push class sizes up from our average of 17.8 last year to 19.7, we would be short by 2 K-4 classrooms from day 1. If the demographers are wrong regarding the enrollment trend, that capacity problem would grow over time. The fact that we would have no excess capacity would mean that we would have no space in which to experiment with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning concepts before investing extensive funds in new spaces. It is easy to say that we could build a new school to any capacity that we want. However, my understanding is that the Oak Creek property, the only current site that has been discussed as a potential location for a new school has serious limitations in terms of buildable space. In addition, we wouldn't want to spend additional taxpayer funds to build a school that has significant excess capacity, nor would we want to build a school that is too small at the outset only to find that we need additional capacity. I believe the capacity analysis and the unclear data on enrollment trends argue clearly for maintaining the capacity that we already have in the system.

- Potential for programming cuts at all schools (elementary, middle and high) if bond payments are locked in but budget pressures continue (a reduction in flexibility)
- Larger class sizes for many students – The district has so far been comfortable pushing the boundaries of its own policies with regard to class size. I believe the push to achieve operating cost savings under any of the consolidation options will increase this pressure.
- Potential for younger children to feel overwhelmed in a bigger school with more people in it
- Potential for special needs students to feel overwhelmed in a bigger school
- Potential for students to develop fewer deep relationships in a bigger school with a higher student to teacher ratio (e.g. The calculations regarding the addition of languages shows that a French and/or Spanish teacher would go from a 410:1 ratio with three schools to 984:1 in a single school. This difference in student-to-teacher ratio will not be as pronounced for other types of teachers, but there will be pressure to increase workloads to achieve cost savings.)
- Potential that rather than offering all the extracurricular activities currently offered across the three schools now the administration pares them back to a few core activities to make the school more efficient and because there will be fewer staff overall to run them.
- Potential for less parental and/or community involvement if the school(s) feel less like community or neighborhood schools
- Potential for longer transportation times for nearly all children to the Southeast Quadrant with Option 5 and transportation of all Chamberlin neighborhood students in any of the consolidation scenarios
- In scenarios where 5<sup>th</sup> graders move to the middle school they give up
  - Playgrounds and outside time that go with being in elementary school.
  - The opportunity to have a leadership experience within their schools as they enter their tween years.
  - One additional year of a small supportive group of teachers and staff who have known them for 5 years.
  - One additional year in one of the highest performing elementary schools in the state in exchange for an additional year at the middle school, which has been described as a challenging environment by many parents.

- Administrative capacity is not an unlimited resource, nor is funding. Gaps in our educational programming have been identified more clearly at the middle and high schools than in our elementary schools. Consolidation would take up both administrative capacity and funding that could be deployed with greater impact at the middle and high schools first.

In summary, there are both advantages and disadvantages of consolidation with respect to educational quality. Most of the clear advantages of consolidation appear to relate to administration of the schools and potential operating cost savings as opposed to direct improvements to educational offerings. Consolidation certainly makes the jobs of staff and administration in the district easier, but the impacts on students and families are less certain and potentially quite negative. I would need to see much clearer educational benefits of consolidation before I would agree to close any of our high-performing elementary schools, and after months studying the issue, I am not convinced that they exist.

### **Financial Impact**

The financial case for consolidation presented by the administration as I understand it has been that:

- Budgets will be increasingly difficult to pass in the future as expenses grow and student enrollment declines. We may have to reduce programming in order to ensure that costs stay within the range that taxpayers are willing to support. Consolidation should help control growth of the budget by reducing operating and stewardship expenses.
- Aging buildings mean that stewardship costs will continue to increase over time. Building a new building and closing one or more of the aging buildings will reduce stewardship costs, offsetting the costs of the new building.
- Programs like languages and expanded music could be added back to the elementary curriculum at a lower cost if we had fewer buildings to cover.

The financial impact of each of the proposed reconfiguration scenarios has been clearly outlined by White + Burke. I presented further analysis completed by the financial subcommittee at the most recent school board meeting on August 23<sup>rd</sup> which I won't repeat in any detail now. However, here are a few key thoughts about each option.

Option 1 – Option 1 is clearly the least expensive option in the short term. However, I believe we could see medium- to long-term costs associated with this option, like the loss of tuition students and potentially a wider decline in enrollment as families choose to settle elsewhere if we do not invest in our schools to maintain our leadership position in the county and the state. I do not believe Option 1 is a viable option over the long term.

Option 2 – Option 2 would put into place a program for upgrading our already high-performing schools to ensure they continue to provide excellent, up-to-date programming for our students. As I've said in the past, I do not believe Option 2 is a binary decision. In choosing this option now, we do not need to commit to the precise costs outlined in the White + Burke presentations. I do not believe enough work has been done yet to set priorities for which upgrades are necessary and to determine what the actual cost of each of them would be.

Option 3 – As presented in my analysis on August 23, Option 3 does potentially save the district some costs on the order of \$9 million before upgrades are considered versus Option 1. These cost savings must be weighed against the risk that we must make more changes to Orchard and Central than

considered in the White + Burke analysis in order to provide enough capacity for our K-4 students. If we decide that we need maker spaces or project rooms or that we would like to expand district-run pre-school, and we have consolidated to two schools under Option 3, we will face additional costs to build out those spaces, as there will be no excess capacity at the elementary school level.

Option 4 – Option 4 envisions building a \$28 million new school in addition to making \$2.7 million in changes to Orchard to accommodate a larger population of younger students since it would house all the K-2 students in the district. The educational benefits of this option would have to be much clearer to me to justify such an expense.

Option 5 – Option 5 envisions building a \$37 million new school in addition to \$1.9 million in upgrades at the middle school to make space for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. As with Option 4 the educational benefits of this option would have to be much clearer to me to justify such an expense.

After assessing the financial impact of each of the proposed options, I believe that the most financially viable option is Option 2. Options 4 and 5 are simply too expensive to take on without a clear educational vision to support them. Option 3 leaves the district too constrained in terms of capacity to ensure that we can continue to provide the quality of education our community expects without the risk that we will need to take on additional costs to re-expand capacity if enrollment numbers stabilize or increase. I believe Option 1 exposes the district to falling revenues because it would cause our schools to fall behind other districts over time leading to declining enrollment from tuition students and parents choosing to live in other districts.

### **Community Impact**

There was no subcommittee to study the community impact of each of the options in the way that we focused on educational quality and financial impact. I believe this aspect of the decision is incredibly important as the schools help to draw and retain members of our community.

High quality schools are part of the very identity of South Burlington. My own family chose South Burlington over surrounding communities because of the quality of its schools. Districts around the country strive to put in place what we already have – high performing, small elementary schools with a high level of community and parental support. As a result, the community feedback process has shown that there is strong support for maintaining the current configuration of our schools. While we did hear from community members who would like to see consolidation for a variety of reasons, there were many fewer of them than those who supported the current configuration. Option 2 was the clear choice of those community members who chose to attend our feedback sessions.

Closing any of our schools would have a negative impact on our community and the neighborhoods within it. The focus on how many students walk or bike to school is a red herring. (Although it is important to many families who do walk or bike to school, and those options would be available to very few students if the new school is built at the Oak Creek property.) The community perceives the schools as neighborhood schools and treats them as such. Many families chose where to live based on which school their children would attend. Community bonds have formed around these schools. In particular, Chamberlin is a lynchpin of its community's identity, and closing it would have a serious negative impact on a neighborhood that has already faced considerable challenges over the past decade. We have heard

from the Chamberlin neighborhood that they want their school to stay open despite concerns about noise and the encroachment of the airport.

I concede that some form of community bonds would form around any new school, but they would come only after a significant disruption to the ones that have built up over the years at our current schools. As with the financial impact of the options, I could be willing to take on disruption to our school communities if I felt the proposed improvements in educational quality were tangible and large enough to justify it.

Beyond the issue of community bonds, there could be a significant negative impact on the property values in the areas surrounding any schools that we choose to close.

### **Conclusion and Proposed Next Steps**

If I had to vote or take action today, I would support Option 2.

- Doing nothing is not an option in my mind, and there is no clear case for consolidation financially, educationally or from a community perspective.
- Preserves capacity of our elementary schools while we determine actual trends in enrollment
- Preserves Chamberlin school, which is an important part of our community
- Avoids locking in significant debt service payments that could eventually erode our ability to maintain programming
- Allows us the flexibility in terms of both administrative and financial capacity to prioritize upgrades at the middle and high schools that are more desperately needed to move programming forward
- I have simply not seen a clear vision for what education would look like for our elementary school children under option 4 or 5.
- Option 3 would appear to provide few significant educational benefits and would reduce our capacity to critical levels. It also requires a major transition for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to the middle school, which the community has said repeatedly that it does not want and which I do not think is appropriate.
- We need to provide families – both current and those considering moving into or out of South Burlington as a result of the schools – with some certainty for the next several years. We cannot continue to come to families with proposals every few years to make major changes like moving the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to the middle school or completely reconfiguring the elementary schools. I am concerned that we are making declining enrollment a self-fulfilling prophecy by continuing to hold out the idea that there may be significant changes at the elementary schools in the next few years. In particular, I'm concerned that the continued discussion about closing Chamberlin could cause families to choose not to live in that neighborhood or to send their children to other schools to avoid disruption, causing enrollment to decline more than it otherwise might.
- I would propose that we spend the next three years focusing on the middle and high schools while we wait to see what enrollment trends develop at our elementary schools. If after three years we are still facing challenges relating to uneven enrollment across the elementary schools, we should consider the initiation of a redistricting process that could take 2-3 years. This would help families know what to expect for at least the next five years for the elementary schools.

In proposing Option 2, I propose the following next steps to begin to address the challenges facing the district.

- Develop a prioritized and cost-estimated list of upgrades for the middle and high schools
- Identify high-priority upgrades at the elementary schools (if any) with cost estimates
- Noise at Chamberlin – Complete the noise study that is proposed in conjunction with the airport and/or implement our own if they are not moving fast enough. Work to secure mitigation funds from all available sources. Monitor changes in noise with the arrival of the F-35s in 2019.
- Create a curriculum committee to review what we are offering our students currently and what we as a community believe we should be offering our students. The committee's work would include defining what 21<sup>st</sup> century learning means to our district and recommending curriculum changes to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. It would also consider the question of whether to reincorporate languages, music and other offerings to the elementary school curriculum.
- Develop guidelines for what changes in the district might cause us to reconsider a move toward consolidation – e.g. significant decline in enrollment, extremely negative outcome of the noise study at Chamberlin, the determination by the community that it wants to develop a UVM arena on the Central school property