



Cabot School District

Alternative Governance Structure Proposal

Addendum I

{ September 2018 }

Addendum I: *Progress & Challenges*

As the seasons have changed and time has passed since our AGS submission, the Cabot School Board, faculty, staff, administration, and community have remained engaged in developing and debating the best path forward for the education of our students.

This addendum is provided to further support Cabot’s Alternative Governance Structure (AGS) proposal and context to our aspirations for the future of education within our community.



In the past months, Cabot has remained focused on building our sustainable future – we are focused on **striking the right balance** between immediate investment and a tax rate our residents are comfortable with.

We are on track for a great year!

Update on Our Path Forward: Innovative, Independent, and Accountable

- Enhancement of the High School Curriculum: in early April, our faculty presented a bold revision of the existing curriculum that fully realizes the Project Based Learning (PBL) model, further emphasizes experiential learning in the community, and expands upon our existing leadership in personalized learning and flexible pathways to graduation.

We were also able to add a 0.2 FTE design technology position to support our middle school program and complement the type of innovative work being accomplished through the “Cabot Leads” program. Strengthening and enriching our middle school program will create students that are confident and ready to pursue flexible paths to graduation, and excel in the setting of the PBL model.

- A Flexible & Focused Faculty: our proposed budget includes increases in FTE staffing equivalent of our high school language arts and social studies positions, with an investment of only \$9,000. This enables implementation of the revised curriculum and more personalized learning, including capstone projects. Faculty and staff morale and

enthusiasm is high as the new school year has begun, and we have a new principal committed to academic excellence and shared leadership. In the face of uncertainty, we have successfully recruited dynamic educators, and our seasoned faculty have continued to lead the way in providing the professional development, critical thinking, and energy needed to transform our high school curriculum.

- Joining a Larger Supervisory Union: joining a larger supervisory union continues to be a priority means of realizing cost savings, pursuing partnerships and cooperation with neighboring schools. We have carefully assessed the Statewide plan and see significant opportunity in joining the Caledonia Central Supervisory Union, versus other options.
- Advantage Cabot: on Town Meeting Day, Cabot voters declined to approve a \$25,000 grant from the Cabot Community Investment Fund (CCIF) to *Advantage Cabot*. This is viewed as a setback to implementation of their program, however, the School Board remains fully committed to partnering with *Advantage Cabot* with the goal of increasing tuition revenue to support school operations and to broaden our base of students. We are hopeful that approval of the Cabot AGS and certainty as to our school structure will allow for greater public confidence in this endeavor.
- Capital Improvements: the school's most pressing facility need, a new gymnasium roof, is being addressed this summer. On Town Meeting day, Cabot voters approved a \$200,000 CCIF grant to provide for replacement of the existing roof. Separately, community volunteers spent spring break attending to minor upkeep projects of the school, painting facilities, and working to address facility needs. Other annual improvements since the beginning of the Act 46 process have mitigated the most pressing facility needs and addressed several longstanding issues.
- Emphasizing Career Technical Education & Early College: we were pleased to learn that six rising seniors have taken advantage of early college in this academic year. This reinforces our view that our model of high school education is providing the maturity and skills needed for students to excel in post-secondary educational pursuits.
- A Value Added to our Region: we believe that Cabot is most relevant to our region as a hub for experiential learning opportunities, personalized learning plans, and that our leadership in PBL could add value to our neighbors, if utilized. Continuing a secondary education program at Cabot is important to our families and the community – however, as statewide challenges in education funding continue to influence policy, we remain open to the operation of an alternative program or non-traditional structure to meet the needs of our students, in balance with costs taxpayers value, if forcibly merged. Nevertheless, our focus is presently on maintaining our existing structure and role as a PK-12 school.

Update on High School Curriculum & Opportunities [Rule 3450.8(3)]

The Cabot High School Program of Studies for 2018-2019 has thoroughly revised. It is a bold departure from a standard curriculum and is consistent with the vision and goals outlined in the AGS proposal. The Cabot School administration and faculty have assessed these objectives and produced an innovative program, tailored to engage the current student body while leveraging the agility offered by our small size. The new program of studies fulfills the goal of expanding PBL opportunities and integrates the element of a capstone project or series of progressions for students, consistent with the goal of re-introducing opportunities like “IOTA” and “Senior-X.” The year is off to a great start.

The flexibility offered by the new program of studies presents opportunities for faculty, with the assistance of existing staff, to supervise and support experiential learning in the community.

Our first proposed school budget was defeated on Town Meeting day. The School Board re-assessed some of the proposed additions to the high school staff and based upon feedback from families with students enrolled in the school and voters writ large, concluded that:

- There was a preference for prioritizing core curricular positions, e.g. language arts and social studies, over a large investment in a new design/technology position. Addition of this position is deferred and is considered a long-term goal upon enrollment growth or a significant shift in student interests/demographics.
- The increase in language arts and social studies to 0.8 FTE positions from 0.6 FTE and the corresponding revision of the program of studies allows greater flexibility for existing faculty and staff to support some community based experiential learning opportunities. Additionally, community members have substantially revamped the Cabot Mentoring program which is assisting in building connection between students and members of the community. In the near term, there is a sufficient infrastructure in place between existing resources and community volunteers to satisfy the goal of increased community connections, without the need for a designated coordinator position.

In the longer term, we continue to believe an increase in foreign language opportunities and development of tracks within the program of studies would be advantageous to our students.



A Positive Conversation with Secretary Holcombe & Ms. Russo-Savage

On March 9, 2018 the full Cabot School Board, sitting in open session, met with Sec. Rebecca Holcombe and Ms. Russo-Savage to complete our discussion with the Agency of Education concerning our AGS proposal. As a Board, we were pleased to have the opportunity to answer questions and review some of the open questions that remain.

- [Rule 3450.17] A significant portion of our conversation related to our future Supervisory Union assignment and composition. Because of the remaining legal and practical impediments of cross-SU coordination and partnerships among districts, we continue to hold the view that our SU assignment will have major implications for the scope of opportunities for shared resources, collaboration, and cost savings. As a Board, we noted our disappointment with the hesitancy of many districts or neighboring SUs to commit to working together, based upon continuing uncertainty over the statewide plan.
- With the Agency’s Statewide Plan available, we welcome the opportunity to develop closer relationships with the districts part of, or anticipated to be part of, the Caledonia Central SU. Based upon the Agency’s recommendations, we have already engaged in renewed discussions with Danville. Danville is clearly opposed to merger, but appears more receptive to a working relationship as districts within the same SU. Likewise, we see immense value in outreach and partnership with the Caledonia Cooperative and Peacham school districts – ensuring sending districts are aware of our unique programmatic offerings has great potential to grow our student body and provide students in those districts with opportunities and a modality of learning not available in Danville or the St. Johnsbury Academy.
- We encourage the Agency of Education and State Board of Education to consider and recommend to Cabot School District and our neighbors how we may best collaborate, effectively share resources, and work with one another to best education students in our region. We recognize that our region may be suitable to an even larger level of SU consolidation, given the geographic proximity of several medium sized SUs. Our hope is that we will realize operational efficiencies and cost savings unavailable to us through our current SU at a level to offer relief to our taxpayers and a benefit to our students.

Cabot’s Challenges

Cabot’s struggle to pass a school budget this year was well publicized and discussed, locally and within statewide media. An approximately \$180,000 increase in non-discretionary spending obligations, namely increased un-reimbursed special education costs and salary/benefit increases, constrained the ability of the School Board to fully implement the enhancements outlined within the AGS proposal. Simply funding these non-discretionary increases would have resulted in a more than 10% increase in the

homestead tax rate when considered in conjunction with the then projected statewide increase.

Ultimately, use of reserve funds¹ and reductions in spending were able to offset these costs, and we were still able to fund several of our top priorities: an elementary counselor position and increasing FTE positions within the high school program. Unfortunately, due to questions of whether there was sufficient student interest to field full sports teams and the demise of many peer Division IV schools' sports programs we made the difficult decision to reduce funding and seek a co-operative sports agreement with another school for the year ahead.

As a Board, we note that the challenges of Cabot School have been exacerbated by the Act 46 process. With every budget and every meeting turning into a referendum on the future of the school there has been increased divisiveness and polarization within the community. Likewise, doubt over the future of the school has been destabilizing – with some families and faculty seeking alternatives not because they are dissatisfied with the school, rather because they are unsure whether a high school will exist following state action contrary to voter intent. We have no way to quantify the impact of this uncertainty, but the Act 46 process, especially this final phase, has been challenging for parents, teachers, students, and administrators.

Despite these challenges, we have successfully attracted dynamic new faculty members to deliver our innovative high school curriculum, and our campus is looking the best it has in years. Adding a new principal with a deep sense of professionalism, maturity, and wisdom has contributed to a very strong start to the school year. Likewise, our core PK-8 program continues to have broad support within the community and we have made efforts to ensure the social and emotional needs of our most vulnerable students continue to be met. Thus far this year, eight new pupils have joined the Cabot School community and our pre-kindergarten enrollment has been very strong.

We believe increased certainty will assist in re-establishing confidence in neighboring sending districts that our high school will be a viable one, now and in the future. As we strengthen the school and matriculating students shed worry of whether they will be able to graduate from Cabot High School we are optimistic that our tuition student enrollment will return to pre-Act 46 levels – providing greater social breadth in the school, assisting in ratios, and providing additional funds to ensure our sustainability.

Cabot's Future in a Time of Education Finance Reform & Uncertainty

In February, Cabot hosted the entire Washington County Senate delegation, along with our representative, Rep. Kitty Toll (Caledonia/Washington), Rep. Scott Beck of St. Johnsbury, and Rep. Sam Young, of Glover. At the hearing, Cabot residents emphasized taxes, Act 46, the excess spending threshold and penalty, and the cost of special education.

¹ The recently completed audit of FY18 operations indicates a surplus of approximately \$149,000, meaning our reserve fund has been replenished and expanded by nearly \$100,000.

We are concerned that the statewide plan is being developed at a time when significant reforms to education finance and special education funding are being considered – assessing school districts under old models in the face of potentially altered economics could impact the savings or lack thereof associated with the implementation of some structures.

Our FY 19 budget includes an expected \$134,499 increase in unreimbursed special education costs, the single greatest line item increase, and at \$509,890 total, will account for nearly 15% of the budget. Despite this, we delivered a budget below the excess spending threshold and at a sustainable level of spending.

- The School Board believes the census based model of special education funding will provide much needed flexibility to meet the needs of our students – a student body with high rates of poverty and many with a trauma history who stand to benefit immensely from early intervention and quality support services.
- The School Board is cognizant that the substantial increase in special education funding is likely a temporary issue, associated with several trends: an increase in the population of students with childhood trauma, the opiate epidemic, and the corresponding impacts on family stability. Nevertheless, this is an area of non-discretionary spending where more efficient delivery of services, and successful behavioral outcomes, will allow for a return to a more sustainable level of funding.

Our voters have sent mixed messages with regard to the future: three board positions were filled on Town Meeting Day by candidates who fully supported the AGS proposal and the authorization of CCIF dollars to repair the gymnasium roof indicate support for the school. Contrarily, the rejection of the budget and CCIF request by *Advantage Cabot* suggests trepidation and concern over the costs associated with realizing the AGS in the short term. Since budget season, passions over the school have largely settled.

Our Plan

Throughout the Act 46 process we have remained engaged with our community, with policy makers, and have never lost sight of the ultimate goal of providing the best opportunities possible to our students – irrespective of how the school district is structured. Our questionnaire returned to the State Board of Education prior to the August 19, 2018 meeting sets forth our position with respect to Agency’s recommendation that Cabot merge with the Danville School District. We take the Danville School Board’s unanimous vote not to support merger as a sign that a forced merger would set in motion a potentially acrimonious union without the community support necessary to achieve the shared vision and good will needed to foster transition of governance, and likely, school structure. The Danville presentation on August 15, 2018 re-affirmed these concerns.

We also recognize the protections for school structures proposed within the default articles of agreement for involuntary mergers. With the mindset that Cabot School will continue in its current operating structure for this year and the next two academic years, we have the confidence to proceed with strengthening our bonds with regional sending districts. Accordingly, we plan to:

- Continue implementation of our new high school curriculum and adopt the changes proposed within our AGS proposal in an incremental manner.
- Begin planning on SU transition from Washington Northeast to Caledonia Central.
- Conduct direct outreach with our neighboring school boards, and develop relationships between staff and educators among our schools. Specifically, Peacham, Walden, Stannard, Waterford, and Barnet.
- Continue dialogue with Danville, assuming we are two independent PK-12 districts within the same SU. Likewise, initiate dialogue with Hazen Union concerning prospective collaboration if the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union is modified by the State Board of Education.



Middle school students who helped harvest the first school garden crop.

Conclusion

We persist in our belief that we offer something to our students and our region that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Cabot is pioneering the flexibility and innovation necessary to sustain a community centered rural school. Our innovative programming and educational culture at Cabot are highly relevant to our region; we can and should serve as a hub for creative and flexible pathways to graduation. Our ultimate goal is to ensure our school remains strong, and ensuring that our high school students do not lose the opportunities

presently available in Cabot. We are greatly concerned by the Danville School Board’s apparent shift in position between our summer meetings and the August 15, 2018 State Board meeting – indicating less flexibility and openness about the future of Cabot School.

In conclusion, we are committed to implementing our sustainable future, even if in a slower or more incremental manner. We do not believe that a merger with Danville is practicable under the current conditions – it is clear to us that there is not a shared vision or consensus concerning our communities working together. While disappointing, we are confident we can proceed with our plan and provide our students with the breadth of educational opportunities and experiences to succeed in the Vermont of the future. We look forward to the conclusion of the Act 46 process.

Respectfully Submitted,

Cabot School Board of Directors

Chris Tormey, Chair

Sharon O’Connor Vice-Chair

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Appendices

- APPENDIX I-A: Cabot High School Program of Studies, 2018-2019
- APPENDIX I-B: Minutes of March 9, 2018 Meeting with Sec. Holcombe
- APPENDIX I-C: Response to SBOE Questions (August Regional Meeting)