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Education chief to talk with ANwSU schools

Posted on September 21, 2009 | By [Andy Kirkaldy](#) [Vergennes](#)

VERGENNES — When Vermont Commissioner of Education Armando Vilaseca visits Vergennes this week, he will discuss two issues the Vermont Board of Education has identified as critical — one in which local officials said Vergennes Union High School is already a statewide leader and another in which by March Vergennes-area schools may lead Vermont.

Vilaseca will open the VUHS board meeting agenda at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday in the school library, where he and board members — and as many local residents who care to attend — will review both ongoing VUHS “school transformation” efforts and the upcoming push to unify Addison Northwest Supervisory Union governance under a single board.

A vote on board unification could be held in March.

ANwSU Superintendent Tom O'Brien said the state board has identified school transformation at the high school level as a top educational priority, and consolidation of the state's school districts as a vital long-term measure to rein in spiraling school costs.

As for transformation, VUHS officials have made changes along the lines of what state officials seek, O'Brien said, and Vilaseca's visit will reinforce that work.

“He's aware of what we're doing. We got a grant for our transformation efforts. In many, many ways, the things that are part of the state's transformation effort, we had already begun doing or are doing right now,” he said.

One of those efforts is lead by French teacher Matt DeBlois. He was awarded \$100,000 by a private foundation and the state DOE awarded VUHS \$75,000 in December to continue improving on the school's morning meeting and callback system.

Classroom teachers can identify students immediately who are not grasping concepts and inform morning meeting teachers. Morning meeting teachers then tell students to meet with classroom teachers during callback time, which is set aside each day for that purpose. Students can thus catch up quickly before they fall too far behind.

Other teachers are reworking the school's graduation requirements to better reflect modern societal requirements, and have also worked in the school and attended courses and conferences to learn how to enhance the school's atmosphere and culture, all with the larger focus, O'Brien said, on better meeting individual students' needs.

Vilaseca plans a series of visits around the state, and O'Brien believes the work at VUHS will come up elsewhere.

“This high school is a leader in that area,” O'Brien said. “That's part of what Armando's intent is. He wants to be able to move around the state and see what's happening, so he can point to Vergennes Union High School ... as a model of what he's talking about.”

ONE-BOARD EFFORT

ANwSU residents will be directly involved in the Wednesday's other central issue. In two close votes in 2005, they said no to having all four ANwSU schools operated and owned by a single board. In the first vote, a small overall majority said yes, but the needed positive vote in each of the five towns was not obtained.

In May, the ANwSU board voted unanimously to start the process again, and a subcommittee has met monthly since. O'Brien said board members decided the time was right.

“(In 2007) we had the economy crash. With the cost of education, property taxes going up, all of the feedback we saw from the administration and the legislature during that time, folks have been asking about, ‘When are you going to bring that notion back? When are we going to have that discussion

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State officials will be following the process in ANwSU closely, O'Brien said, and the topic will be on the table on Wednesday.

"I suspect either (Vilaseca) will introduce, or board members will introduce, the notion of governance," he said. "So that should prove to be an interesting discussion."

Preparations for a vote on one-board governance will begin this fall with public forums run by Vermont Council on Rural Development, a nonprofit with experience on community issues. O'Brien said having a neutral party coordinate the forums should help residents get to the heart of the issues while board members listen.

"They're experienced in running the forums, so the people can have the discussion and frame the issues as they see them. And the board can hear it unfiltered," O'Brien said.

Among the one-board advantages O'Brien sees are more stable tax rates. Although such a board would have no control over "common level of appraisal" adjustments (known as CLA), he said projections in recent years showed rates would have been more stable under a unified union, in part because of shared costs. He used special education as an example.

"If each district (town) is responsible for its own special ed and its cost ... as we've seen, only one or two special situations, and the costs involved skyrocket, as do the subsequent impacts on tax rates," he said. "As a district ... those costs level."

Objections in 2005 included how to handle Vergennes recreation property owned by the Vergennes ID board. That property will be offered formally this week to the city, O'Brien said. Others feared school closures, but he said officials are not discussing that option.

A switch could save some money, for example, because fewer audits will be necessary and more purchasing can be centralized. But O'Brien said human capital might be a larger issue. Even with the recent voter-approved elimination of three ID boards by next Town Meeting Day, ANwSU will still have five school boards with 22 members. But ANwSU could end up with one 12-member board — with four members each from Vergennes and Ferrisburgh, two from Addison, and one each from Panton and Waltham — if it follows the path ANwSU officials proposed in 2005.

"The thinking behind it is doing things once — whether it be purchasing, meeting or curriculum, or you name it — is much more efficient and economical than doing it five or seven times over," he said.

O'Brien also noted that some were concerned in 2005 that the needs of the smaller towns would be ignored. He countered that no one has ever said that is the case at VUHS, which now makes up the majority of ANwSU spending and is run with proportional representation from the five towns.

"The high school is a microcosm of what is being proposed. It's the exact same structure that we're talking about for a unified union," O'Brien said. "There are five towns involved in a single entity. Rather than just the high school being that way, it would be the high school and the elementaries."

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