

State Ed Board Approves Northeast Kingdom Choice School District

Ten PreK-12 Choice Districts Now Ask Voters to Approve Plan

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The State Board of Education has given the green light to the proposed Northeast Kingdom Choice School District.

Haley Dover, spokeswoman for the Vermont Agency of Education and the State Board of Education, said the proposal for the new district, forming under Act 46, was approved during the board's meeting in Barre on Tuesday.

The new district, if approved by voters at their annual town meetings in March, will serve Bloomfield, Brunswick, East Haven, Granby, Guildhall, Kirby, Lemington, Maidstone, Norton and Victory. All of the towns offer PreK-12 school choice.

The board to serve the new district will be made up of 11 elected members, one from each town except Kirby, which will have two seats on the board and has the highest number of students.

Traveling to Barre for the meeting before the state education board this week were superintendents from the districts involved in the new choice district, said Caledonia North Supervisory Union (CNSU) Superintendent Jen Botzjorns, as well as the NEK Choice School District governance study committee chair and Kirby School Board chair Miles Etter, the committee's consultant, Martha Heath, and Tisha Hankinson, CNSU's business manager.

In addition to Botzjorns, Michael Clark, superintendent of the Essex-Caledonia Supervisory Union (ECSU), and Chris Masson, superintendent of the Essex North Supervisory Union, also helped make the presentation.

"The group shared the work of the committee in their commitment to our children's educational opportunities and the choice to meet those needs. They reaffirmed to the State Board the NEK Choice communities' belief in parents'

ability to choose a school that best meets their child's needs," said Botzjorns. "They also highlighted the opportunities for taxpayers including less volatility in tax rates caused by small numbers of student moving into a town; tax incentives; SU level savings, and the vote on town Meeting Day."

Botzjorns said the board "asked a number of questions regarding Canaan's role given their geographic isolation. There was some conversation about choice and tuition, the presenters were unwavering in their support for maintaining choice for students."

The board then voted and announced their approval.

"The group would like to be sure to invite the citizens of each town to attend informational meetings to become aware of the details so they may make an informed vote on Town Meeting Day," said Botzjorns.

The choice district will be in a two-district alternate governance structure with the Canaan School District (Essex North) and has been approved for the alternate governance structure due to geographic isolation.

Just shy of 300 pupils will make up the new school choice district if all the towns vote in the affirmative, giving the new choice district lobbying power as a larger voice for school choice, advocates explained.

Act 46 was passed in 2015 and is aimed at sizing school districts into larger systems with like governance structures to be more cost-effective and to provide more educational opportunities to students.

Vermont's public schools have lost more than 20,000 students since 1997, and the demographic trend is expected to continue through at least 2030, state officials have been told.

Etter said that the commitment of the three supervisory union staff, community members and their consultant allowed for the

choice district proposal to come together and earn approval.

School district boards will need to sign the warning for the new district, and NEK Choice school board candidates will need to get petitions and signatures to be placed on the ballot, said Etter.

"This will be an Australian Ballot vote to merge or not, and to vote for board representatives," said Etter. "I believe this will be a new process for most, if not all, districts."

"We are hopeful that people will understand the goals to maintain choice and help taxpayers are available in this new district proposal," he said.

Clark said, "The proposal maintains school choice as the towns involved currently have choice. By moving the services provided to these ten school districts by three Supervisory Union offices to just one Supervisory District the financial models project at least an \$85,000 savings each year."

According to Masson, "It will flatten out some of the wild fluctuations in the tax rates we've been seeing. If you have a district with 12 students and three or four move in unannounced, it really creams these towns."

Masson said, "By having a much larger pool of students, that will alleviate this issue... That is the big benefit as far as I'm concerned."

The consultant for the choice committee, Martha Heath, said of Tuesday's approval, "It was an acknowledgement of the excellent work by the committee and an important next step forward in the work to form this new district."

"(Tuesday's) presentation to the State Board emphasized the opportunity for students to continue to choose the school that best meets their educational needs and the opportunity for taxpayers to be better shielded from the volatility of student numbers and to be able to take advantage of tax incentives," said Heath.