

Board Chair's Message

The primary responsibility of the School Board is to assemble a budget that best utilizes the available resources of the community that provide the highest quality, most equitable education for our students.

Over the course of previous cycles, the Board has trimmed all available excess from the budget with hope that it becomes acceptable to voters. Through experience, we have learned that you simply cannot cut your way to a successful budget without negatively affecting student services. For the Board to continue to lower the cost of education in a meaningful way, we must fundamentally change the way in which we utilize our facilities. Slate Valley is not unlike most districts in Vermont that continue to see a decline in student population. This decrease is a result of many factors, most outside our immediate control, and include; an aging population, static economic growth, increased vocational and early-college opportunities for students, and a generally more competitive environment amongst area schools.

One of the benefits afforded by our recent consolidation into Slate Valley, is the opportunity to reconfigure our schools to best address declining student population. Bringing our 7th and 8th grade students together at the high school will create the critical mass of students necessary to offer more robust programming and give kids more opportunity to pursue their interests in sports, music, arts & culture, science & technology, and the great outdoors. This reconfiguration will also allow the District to better utilize our facilities, prioritize infrastructure needs, and manage declining student population.

We are a small, close knit community. I am very proud of how all school administration, teachers and staff, families, and most especially students have come together, through collective sacrifice and compromise, to meet the challenges of this pandemic head on.

While we are very mindful of the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic, we can also see clearly the educational needs of our students continue to grow. This proposed reconfiguration realizes both primary goals of the School Board; to best utilize hard-earned tax payer money, and to provide the highest quality education possible. We thank the community for your continued support.

Tim Smith, Board Chair

District Reorganization - An Overview

The Slate Valley board is currently exploring a district reorganization plan. The plan would consolidate 7th and 8th grade students at the high school beginning in the fall of 2022. Reorganization is an effort to address the ongoing challenges facing many districts throughout the state including declining enrollment, infrastructure needs, increasing costs, and decreasing capacity to meet student needs.

Benson Village School anticipates having only 8 students between grades 7 and 8 next school year. Operating a middle school with so few students would not be a sustainable model. In order to address this problem, the board voted on December 7 to make BVS a preK through 6 school and allow Benson middle school students to have in-district school choice with transportation for the 2021-2022 school year.

The reorganization plan would also impact Castleton Village School, which currently serves grades 6 through 8. In the fall of 2022, grade 6 students would attend Castleton Elementary School and grades 7 and 8 students would join the rest of the district middle school students at the high school. The building would be closed or educationally repurposed.

Why reorganize?

Like many districts across the state, Slate Valley continues to struggle with declining enrollment, infrastructure needs, increasing costs, and the challenge of meeting student needs. The merger resulted in a great number of efficiencies within our district including consolidation of technology, nursing, building/grounds, finance, athletics, and communication. We have run out of options in our current configuration.

Taxes and Fixed Costs: Many of our towns saw significant decreases in taxes the first year of the merger and some have still not returned to pre-merger tax rates 3 years later.

Equalized Homestead Tax Rates

	Unmerged				SVMUUSD	SVUUSD
	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20
Benson	1.3588	1.3815	1.4371	1.4373	↓ 1.3772	1.4480
Castleton	1.4029	1.4110	1.4161	1.5385	↓ 1.4616	1.4480
Fair Haven	1.3576	1.3719	1.4230	1.4490	↓ 1.3772	1.4480
Hubbardton	1.4848	1.4834	1.5040	1.5774	↓ 1.4985	1.4480
Orwell	1.2593	1.3955	1.3471	1.3903	1.5387	↓ 1.4618*
West Haven	1.1357	1.5432	1.1050	1.2553	↑ 1.3181	1.3840

You will note in the first year of the SVMUUSD merger (FY19) Benson, Castleton, Hubbardton and Fair Haven all saw significant reductions in taxes. Had the merger not occurred, their tax rates would likely not have decreased at all.

*In Orwell's 1st year of the SVUUSD merger (FY20) there was a significant tax decrease as well.

While we may have exhausted the possibilities in our current configuration, there are more efficiencies to be realized with the consolidation of district middle school students. In the past, the community has indicated an interest in the creation of a district middle school. Based on the buildings in the district, location, and instructional needs, the board decided to explore the consolidation of middle school students at the high school. This would allow for reorganization without the need for a significant amount of construction.

Benefits of Reorganization

Over the last 3 years, 19 positions have been reduced, including 1 administrative position. In our current configuration, there are few if any further efficiencies to be gained. However, it is estimated that the district reorganization plan would result in the reduction of approximately 20 positions, including 3 administrative positions over the next few years. This could save approximately \$1,000,000 in personnel costs. The board hopes to use some of these savings to address infrastructure needs in the district.

In addition to financial benefits, there are educational and social/emotional benefits to district reorganization. For example, middle school students benefit from learning with and among a larger, more diverse group of students. Educators and students will benefit from flexible grouping, scheduling, and interdisciplinary teaming, consistent common planning time, multiple times per week, and interdisciplinary teams that maintain the same students and teachers for two years. Students will see more opportunities to advance in studies, and potential for extracurricular activities that do not currently exist.

Finally, the district would be able to maintain equity and educational opportunity for all students in the face of declining enrollments. The creation of a district middle school provides the number of students needed to offer a full range of programs. Students will benefit from peer leaders and peer tutors as well as the development of college and career readiness. The focus can be on the development of a Slater from grades 7 through 12.

Upcoming Events

- January 11, 2021, 6:30 p.m. - SVUUSD Board Meeting
- January 12, 2021 - Week of Virtual Listening Tours (Board Members/Community)





Reorganization Timeline

The school board has the authority to realign the grade levels that a school serves. They would need a simple majority for this to occur.

Voting Dates

December 7, 2020

- The School Board voted to realign Benson Village School to PreK-6- Giving 7th and 8th grade school choice with transportation to Orwell, Fair Haven or Castleton.

May 24, 2021

- Realign Orwell Village School to PreK-6 beginning July 1, 2022.
- Realign Fair Haven Grade School to PreK-6 beginning July 1, 2022.
- Realign Castleton Elementary School to PreK-6 beginning July 1, 2022.
- Realign Fair Haven Union High School to 7-12 beginning July 1, 2022.

*Castleton Village School will be either closed or educationally repurposed.

- To repurpose it would require a 75% vote of the board.
- To close it would require a 75% vote of the board and the majority of voters in Castleton and Hubbardton. It would be put out the voters on town meeting day in 2022 for consideration and close as of June 30, 2022 with a positive vote.