May 6, 2025

To: WCUUSD School Board
From: Steven Dellinger-Pate, Superintendent

The Washington Central Unified Union School District (WCUUSD) is guided by a deep commitment to its core beliefs: Humanity, Justice, Equity, and Belonging; Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction; Well-Being; Transparent and Responsible Leadership; Community Engagement and Relationships. At the intersection of these values lies a unique opportunity to reimagine the learning landscape for our students through two interdependent proposals: continuing Turtle Island at Doty Memorial School and including the 5th and 6th grade students in the broader Rumney School community.

On February 17, the Board Chair of Turtle Island reached out to our district to inquire about the possibility of leasing space at one of our facilities. In response, district administration began exploring options and the Superintendent briefed the Board in Executive Session on March 12 regarding the potential opportunity. Following that, administration and Turtle Island initiated a fact-finding process to assess both their programmatic needs and the district's available facilities.

Doty Memorial School, with its rural setting and close-knit culture, is ideally suited to house this program. The physical environment and staffing at Doty provide both the logistical and cultural conditions for Turtle Island to thrive, and for the district to pilot scalable practices in place-based education that may eventually serve students across our system.

Doty Memorial School offers space that could meet licensing and fire code requirements with minimal modifications. Other sites, including Calais and Berlin Elementary Schools, were also visited and considered. While each has some space available, Doty was determined to best meet nearly all of Turtle Island's operational needs.

Turtle Island is a place-based educational program rooted in the local ecology, indigenous wisdom, and a commitment to hands-on, meaningful learning. By continuing this program at Doty Memorial School, we uphold WCUUSD's dedication to personalized and rigorous instruction that connects students to their community and the natural world. Turtle Island reflects the District's strategic commitment to:

- **Equity**: Offering every student access to meaningful, relevant learning that honors their identity and lived experience.

- **Engagement**: Creating a curriculum that fosters curiosity, agency, and authentic learning through outdoor and project-based education.
- **Community Connections**: Turtle Island leverages relationships with local experts, elders, and knowledge keepers, fulfilling our goal of strengthening partnerships that benefit students and the community alike.

The second part of the proposal centers on the inclusion of 5th and 6th grade students at Rumney School. This recommendation is driven by both educational and developmental needs and is strategically aligned with the WCUUSD mission to prepare all students for academic success and civic contribution.

By joining the 5th and 6th graders with their Rumney peers:

- We support smoother transitions to middle school, providing critical socialization and academic scaffolding.
- We ensure equitable access to specialists, extracurriculars, and peer learning, fostering the inclusive academic excellence the district strives for.
- We relieve logistical constraints in other elementary configurations while still supporting small school identity and personalized instruction.

This alignment not only addresses enrollment and resource concerns, but also supports stronger peer cohorts, broader instructional collaboration, and professional learning communities among staff.

Rationale

By investing in and collaborating with early childhood education providers, our district can create communities where families want to live and raise their children. This approach not only supports local families but also strengthens our workforce and attracts students to our schools.

Vision and Strategic Plan - The goals of our strategic plan are to build and nurture a culture of inclusivity and to create and strengthen connections with our community while building a financially sustainable configuration. Our own configuration committee identified early childcare a priority in our planning for the future.

Benefits of early childhood education- In addition to providing a valuable service to the community, a strong early childhood care and education model—beginning at Doty—could and should be expanded to other elementary schools in the district. Early childhood education supports the development of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills, all of which align

with our district's core values. A strong early childhood education program helps children build foundational skills in language, self-regulation, and social interaction, while fostering positive relationships. Long-term benefits include school readiness, reduced dropout rates, and greater social equity.

Need for childcare in Central Vermont - A review of data from the Child Care Assistance Program, Vermont Bright Futures, and other sources highlights the significant challenges in accessing suitable child care in our region. Identified challenges include shortage of space, high costs, long waitlists, strain on existing providers, and a real economic impact on families, communities and businesses. We can help address this crisis. (Chronicle Article)

Opportunity for students to have more diverse classes with multiple groupings and configurations - Our students need classrooms that provide as much diversity as possible while maintaining a staff to student ratio that allows our students to be known by our educators. According to most research, all of our elementary schools are considered small, with fewer than 300 students. It is essential that we explore every opportunity to sustain our programming while meeting the academic, social-emotional, and physical needs of our students.

Additional Information:

- Expanded Opportunities
    - Childcare - Establishing a partnership at Doty presents an exciting opportunity to enhance early childhood education in the district. NESDEC projections for (Worcester, District), indicate that overall enrollment at Doty is expected to continue declining over the next several years. A public-private partnership would support the optimal use of space and resources, helping to transform Doty into a dynamic learning community serving children from infancy through Grade 4.

School Year	# of Births - 9/1-8/31 Anticipated K enrollment	# of Students that transitioned out in previous June	Net Loss to school population
2025-2026	6 (9/1/19 - 8/31/20)	12	- 6
2026-2027	3	5	- 2
2027-2028	3	9	- 6
2028-2029	6	10	- 4
2029-2030	4	11	- 7

- Access for Worcester families to PreK
  - Worcester families will be guaranteed access to the 10 hours of free PreK3 or PreK4 in the Turtle Island program or can access PreK programming at Rumney Memorial School. Childcare beyond the 10 hours would still be available through Turtle Island or through Community Connections at Rumney (paid for by the families). Support to apply for subsidies will be available.
- 5th and 6th Grade - Combining Doty and Rumney 5th and 6th grades will create two classes of approximately 20-21 students next year, and classes of 15-19 students in the future. These class sizes support flexible groupings, increased peer diversity, and a more balanced gender distribution—particularly in Grade 6. The larger cohort also enables enhanced band, music, and physical education programs. Additionally, services and interventions can be delivered both in small groups and one-on-one, ensuring personalized support for students.

- Long Term Sustainability
  - With the current Legislative Proposals, sustainability and long-term planning remain key priorities. Pending state legislation could impact school operations by reducing per-pupil funding and establishing minimum class size requirements. Under (H.454 as passed by the House):
    - Kindergarten classes must maintain an average minimum of 8 students
    - Grades 1-4 must average at least 15 students
    - Grades 5-12 must average at least 18 students in all required content areas
    - Multi-age classrooms in grades K-8 would be limited to 2 grade levels per room

    - Although this language may change through Senate amendments and reconciliation, all proposed versions suggest funding reductions. (See Scenario C or House Ways and Mean H.454 Draft 4.1) Even if the State did not propose a reduction in funding, the projected loss of almost 200 students in WCUUSD over the next several years will mean a reduction in funding.
    - While this proposed collaboration will not generate enough revenue to offset the total loss in state funding, it does give the district a way to do a pilot program that could be replicated elsewhere.

- Programmatic priorities
    - Doty - Build a strong early childhood center that supports early grades education
    - District - While Doty remains the current focus, we recognize the potential to expand early childhood services to other elementary schools within the district. We will continue to explore these opportunities with the goal of building larger, more integrated learning communities that support both our students and the broader community. Our long-term vision is to create classrooms that promote meaningful social interaction, diverse groupings, and expanded learning opportunities.
    - Middle School Programming - The idea of a 6–8 middle school has been discussed extensively by the Configuration Committee and Leadership Team. We believe now is the right time to move Doty's 5th and 6th students to Rumney Elementary School, as this transition offers immediate access to expanded academic, social, and extracurricular opportunities that are not currently available in their small school setting. While we remain committed to developing a sustainable and inclusive middle school model for the entire district, decisions for all elementary schools moving 6th graders to the middle school will be made after continued configuration conversations. This phased approach allows us to act where there is readiness and clear benefit, while ensuring thoughtful planning and community engagement for future transitions.
- Finances
    - Building cost - Utilities, etc.
        - $190,556 budgeted for FY26
    - Per Pupil costs
        - Centralized Services - these are the costs for transportation, food service, custodial services, utilities, IT services, etc. and are separate from the money allocated for instructional services. These funds are provided to each of our buildings based on the cost, not on a per pupil basis. Special

Education funding is provided to schools based on identified needs of the students.

- Base and Layered Services
  - Doty received $8,236 per pupil for the instructional, SEL, and intervention services. The $17,367 per pupil figure includes all centralized services such as special education, transportation, custodial services, food service, IT services, and other non-instructional services. The funding necessary to provide all these centralized services to students will not be reduced.
  - The base funds allocated to the 5th and 6th grade students would have primarily gone to the salary for the 5/6 teacher, who will not be needed at Doty and will have a position elsewhere in the district. Additionally, Doty budgeted for a .42 FTE PreK teacher. This position will not be needed.

- Title Funds

- Staffing Considerations
  - Doty Staffing will be reduced by one teacher for SY 25-26. In the future, staffing will need to be sized to the student population and needs. Programming in the arts, library, nursing, and counseling will be appropriate to meet both contractual obligations and student and community needs. Some staffing such as food service, nursing, and special education may also support Turtle Island students on a fee basis.
  - Rumney will not need to add additional classroom teachers, music, art, or PE since the Doty students will join existing classes. Depending on the student interventions needs there may be some slight adjustments to staffing for those services.
- Classroom space allocation for K-4
  - Single grade math instruction will still occur. There will be two classes per day, once class will be 4 students, the other will be 10 students. These classes will likely occur in the reconfigured former office space with flexible use of other classrooms on Wednesdays when the art schedule is determined.
  - Currently the art/music room is used two days a week for those classes. The library has classes one day a week and the librarian has one morning a week for collection management.
  - No final decisions around scheduling and space allocation will be made without the participation of DMS staff. It should be noted that with the new configuration, we are anticipating having 3 allied arts blocks per day. The following draft ideas are under consideration:

        - The current music teacher has expressed a preference for having music classes in the library. This space can be easily altered for a day as many of the bookshelves are on wheels.
        - Administrative offices can be rearranged. The closet in the principal's office can be removed, increasing the size. This space could be used for art. For the two years, the schedule allows for more blocks of allied arts in the day so larger classes can be split so that students are not crowded.
    - An opportunity that our K-4 configuration would allow for us to consider an integrated allied arts instructional model. This is a body of work that the Doty staff can undertake during SY 25-26.

- Transportation has also been a significant concern. Throughout this year, we have been reviewing how our transportation can be structured to reduce ride times. Our bus company and transportation coordinator are collaborating on a plan to optimize the use of Middlesex and Worcester bus routes. Early planning indicates that ride times can be kept under one hour, with full transportation provided for all students, including those in Grades 5/6 and those participating in Community Connections programs.
- Lease Elements (Draft Lease Document)
    - Cost
    - Repairs and Care
    - Alterations and Improvements
    - Utilities
    - Property Tax
    - Insurance
    - Access
    - Other legal issues
- MOU Elements - The MOU will be revisited annually by March 31 and will be drafted as a living document in order to ensure that it can respond to any changes.
    - Shared spaces - It is important that outdoor areas and instructional spaces remain accessible to support existing programming. Use of shared spaces will require Turtle Island to request the use of the space and is subject to the approval of the Principal.
        - Playground - Doty students will not lose access to the Doty playground. The community will retain its customary access to the playground outside of school hours.
        - River access - Doty students will not lose access to the river and the learning opportunities there.

        - Gym - This space will remain part of Doty. While TI may access this space as a “field trip,” the schedule for use will prioritize Doty needs.
    - Library - As with the gym. Additionally, if Turtle Island would like to check out books, the MOU would reflect a fee structure to cover the increased cost to the DMS library.
    - Food Service - Under the state’s universal meals law, WCUUSD can include Turtle Island children in its meals program. This eligibility extends to all Turtle Island students—including those below Pre-K age—because Turtle Island is a nonprofit organization that includes a state-approved Pre-K program. The state would provide a universal meals supplement to cover the cost of meals for Turtle Island students who do not qualify for federal free or reduced-price meals.For administrative purposes, Turtle Island could be included as part of Doty Elementary in the school meals program, which would simplify paperwork and eliminate the need for an additional site application. Alternatively, they could be designated as a separate site under the Washington Central School Food Authority. Either option would not affect your district’s free and reduced lunch rate for other Agency of Education (AOE) purposes, as those calculations are limited to students officially enrolled in the district.Additionally, including Turtle Island in the program would make their low-income students eligible for the $120 Summer EBT benefit. However, you would not be required to operate a summer meals program for them, as summer is not considered part of the official “school day” by the AOE. (Universal Meals Guidance, starting on p.6)
    - Nursing - While nursing care would not be withheld from any child in the event of a medical emergency, any regular utilization of nursing services would require that Turtle Island pay a fee.
    - Special Education Services - Any Turtle Island student who is a resident of the WCUUSD district is eligible to receive their EEE services in either space. Services could be provided to students from other districts only with an agreement between the two districts.
    - Parking and Pickup/Dropoff - spaces will be designated for parking for Turtle Island and its families and a procedure for picking up and dropping off students will be outlined.
    - Policies that pertain to use of facilities, including alcohol and tobacco free workplace,
- Transition of 5/6 grades - We acknowledge that this partnership is moving forward faster than anticipated, which presents both opportunities and challenges. We recognize the concerns about transitioning Grades 5 and 6 and the perception of lost

programming. These concerns are being heard and will be addressed with care and transparency to ensure continued student support.

- What the transition would look like:
  - Visits to each school
  - Creating a list of traditions that need to be incorporated into programming at RMS or continued at DMS (ie: Haunted Hallway)
  - Parents night
  - Opening days
- At the request of the Worcester community, we have explored options for keeping the fifth and sixth graders at the Doty campus
  - DMS must retain the primary wing due to its essential infrastructure, which not only supports the building's core operations but also enables it to serve as a designated warming facility and shelter in the town's emergency response plan.
  - The possibility of accessing the art/music room through the library was raised. This room is part of the building addition. While saved construction drawings show that the addition was anchored to the former exterior wall, they do not indicate how this was done. Structural engineering drawings are not available. Without this critical information, creating a doorway would pose significant safety concerns and cannot be pursued at this time.
  - The idea of housing 5th and 6th grade students in a pod classroom has been raised. While this could be considered if a suitable site—free of underground utilities or septic systems—is available, there are significant safety and logistical concerns. Two staff members would be required in the pod at all times, which would impact the budget. Students would also need to transition outdoors in all weather conditions, including to access bathrooms. Additionally, it is unclear how the use of a pod aligns with district-wide safety protocols, and there are concerns about whether this arrangement could feel isolating for students.

The combined proposal—keeping Turtle Island at Doty while enabling 5th and 6th graders to access the Rumney School community—does not split the identity of a school; it honors the identities of children and the diverse ways they learn best. It demonstrates how WCUUSD's strategic plan can be implemented flexibly and creatively to serve real needs, in real places, with real impact.

- **Student Voice & Engagement**: Students thrive when learning is personalized, relevant, and embedded in real-world contexts.
- **Staff Support & Collaboration**: This model allows educators to collaborate across sites and grade levels, supporting both autonomy and professional growth.
- **System-wide Innovation**: Piloting programs like Turtle Island in small schools offers data and insight to guide larger system transformation.

Conclusion

The proposed structure reflects a holistic, student-centered vision that draws on the strengths of small schools, while ensuring equity of access and academic excellence. By situating Turtle Island at Doty and relocating 5th and 6th graders to Rumney, WCUUSD can serve as a statewide model for how rural schools creatively adapt to meet 21st-century goals.

We recommend the School Board endorse this configuration as a pilot for district innovation, with formal support, structured evaluation, and long-term scaling opportunities.