Merger Study Group 20
Draft Meeting Minutes
October 8, 2026
5:00 pm

In Person: Montpelier High School

Virtual: Via Google Meet

School Board Representatives Present:
Flor Diaz-Smith
Dan Morris
Erin Barry
Samn Stockwell
Todd Comen
Tim Duggan

Superintendents Present:
Libby Bonesteel
Matt Foster
Emilie Knisley
Matt Fedders
Jody Emerson

1. Facilitator Call to Order

   The meeting was called to order at 5:00 pm.

2. Welcome and Introductions

   The Regional Facilitator and Board Members briefly introduced themselves.

3. Overview of Committee Roles

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Brad Morgan explained that the regional facilitator guides discussions and remains neutral on merger recommendations, while the Committee Chair presides, handles votes, and serves as the primary contact for the regional facilitator.

4. Merger Committee Organization

    a. Adoption of Robert's Rules of Order

    b. Election of Chair

    c. Establishment of Committee Norms

    d. Determination of future meeting location(s) and meeting cadence

Brad Morgan presented modified Robert's Rules of Order to simplify procedures, including eliminating the requirement for seconds on motions, allowing informal discussions without limits on speaking frequency, permitting the chair to debate and vote, and banning strict debate-closing tools to encourage agreement. The committee adopted these modified rules without objection.

Sam Stockwell suggested waiting until the next meeting to elect a committee chair so members could get to know each other better, and Brad Morgan supported this by noting Group 15's similar approach, leading the committee to postpone the chair election.

Brad Morgan shared sample norms for meeting operations and asked the board to use them as a guide to develop the group's norms at the next meeting. They will be shared via Google Doc for review.

The next meeting was scheduled for November 19th at Northfield High School. While data is important, the group opted to get to work as the timeline is tight. Brad Morgan explained that meetings would rotate across school districts provided internet and presentation capabilities were adequate, and Northfield High School was volunteered as the location for the next meeting

5. Good Faith Standard Review

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Board members reviewed the Good Faith Standard in advance and raised no issues or questions about operating under it.

6. Public Input

No public comment.

7. Act 170 Overview Presentation

David Younce presented an overview of Act 170, succeeding Act 46 to improve regional educational opportunities. He explained that Act 170 establishes 7 CISA regions and mandates shared services for special education and operations. He added that merger committees target a combined ADM of 2,000 students while protecting districts under 750 students. Finally, he added that merger committees must submit a report by September 1, 2027, ahead of public votes on March 7, 2028.

8. Proportional Representation Determination

Brad Morgan shared two options with the board members, but said they could also explore other approaches.

Brad Morgan presented representation options involving either one weighted-vote board member per district, full board attendance, or alternative frameworks. Flor Diaz-Smith proposed operating by consensus with one representative per board for the time being rather than making a binding decision immediately, and Brad Morgan agreed to consult lead facilitator Dave Younce to review this approach

9. Areas of Committee Interest and Next Steps for Next Meeting

    a. November Meeting - Regional Assets Discussion

    b. Other

Flor Diaz-Smith and other members discussed shifting away from rigid non-negotiables and instead focusing on student outcomes, safe schools, multi-layered systems of support, and administering a consistent community survey via SurveyMonkey or mail across all participating

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districts to gather stakeholder input. Brad Morgan agreed to discuss support for survey budgeting with Dave Younce.

Brad Morgan raised the idea of using a community survey to gather public input on potential school mergers, including from stakeholders who may have emotional backlash or real estate concerns. A problem identified was ensuring data reliability and avoiding amateur survey design that could trigger community pushback. Brad Morgan suggested focusing the survey on student opportunity (such as advanced placement courses, dual enrollment, class sizes, and bus ride lengths) rather than budgets, using an electronic scale or similar format, while providing alternative access points at public locations like town clerk offices or public libraries due to poor internet or accessibility issues in Vermont.

Brad Morgan discussed the value of a collaborative Google Doc for boards to share potential survey questions, stressing the importance of community voice. Drawing on personal experience, Brad Morgan explained that failing budgets forced difficult decisions like building closures without community feedback, arguing that involving the community through surveys makes difficult recommendations more acceptable, even if public ideas cannot always be implemented

Brad Morgan outlined specific survey topics to draft, focusing at the high school level on advanced placement and dual enrollment courses, foreign language, athletics, arts, and the risks of small high school sizes. At the elementary level, Brad Morgan highlighted section flexibility, teacher-student fit, class size management for special education and multilingual education, wellness services, nursing, counseling, and access to college preparation.

A the request of the board members, Brad Morgan agreed to draft a consistent community survey grounded in student opportunities and experiences.

Brad Morgan addressed community anxieties surrounding potential school closures, noting that closed school buildings create financial and maintenance burdens. Regarding high school consolidation within a 10- to 15-mile radius from Springfield to Northfield, Brad Morgan and participants discussed that, of six high schools, students could realistically fit into two or three facilities, and current bus rides already take up to 50 minutes.

Brad Morgan mentioned the emotional controversy surrounding potential closures of small rural elementary schools that serve as community gathering places for town meetings and events.

Brad Morgan announced the next meeting logistics: November 19th at 5:00 PM at Northfield High School, and clarified that superintendents present are not voting members.

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Brad Morgan noted that academic benefits of mergers often favor older students, while elementary levels focus on flexibility and support services, and discussed the law's requirement for universal access to at least 10 hours of pre-kindergarten programming. Participants raised concerns about Vermont's academic achievement stats, educational quality standards, and unresolved financial challenges, including unpassed budgets and existing district debt, that could complicate merger cost-sharing, prompting a plan to consult Dave Younce on financial data timelines.

Brad Morgan reviewed action items for representatives to consult their local boards regarding school assets, criteria, and what they love about their schools. Brad Morgan addressed Act 170 requirements and the September submission deadline Dave set for the Agency of Education, noting that while the aggressive timeline might shift due to the late start and summer meeting difficulties, alternative paths require exhausting Act 170 processes first.

10. Agenda Building

This was delayed until the next meeting, when a Chair will be elected.

11. Adjourn

Participants discussed establishing a cadence of monthly meetings to evaluate multiple structural merger models and quickly eliminate unviable options before diving into deeper analysis. Samn Stockwell reported audio difficulties hearing participants through the conference setup, prompting advice on microphone usage, after which Brad Morgan officially adjourned the meeting

Meeting adjourned at 6:55 pm.

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