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Hon. Peter Conlon, Hon. Seth Bongartz, and Hon. Emilie Kornheiser, Committee Chairs
Members of the House Education Committee
Members of the Senate Education Committee
Members of the House Committee on Ways and Means

Dear Committee Chairs, Representatives and Senators,

Thank you for your work on Act 73. I am writing to you as the Chair of the Selectboard of the Town of Corinth (Orange County). Corinth's students are part of Waits River Valley School and the OESU District.

While I appreciate that Vermont needs education reform to find a balanced, sustainable system, I urge you not to remove school choice for small towns that historically tuition high school students. School choice provides socio-economic diversity in small rural towns like ours, and is essential to long-term viability. Until serving as the selectboard chair, I would not have recognized how important it is to factor in this impact among the many variables in your school reform planning.

School choice provides a meaningful promise of socio-economic diversity for communities like Corinth. One of the few opportunities that towns like mine offer to attract young families into our community is school choice. We don't have municipal water, trash pick-up, or a police department, but we offer school choice. Without it I am quite certain that towns like Corinth will lose families and with them the next generation of taxpayers and town volunteers that help make municipal governance viable. Current Act 73 districting proposals of the House and Senate Education Committees threaten to disengage our community from that part of the education network that is working-- dismantling decades of successful community development patterns built around school choice.

School Choice Rewards Steady Enrollment and Fiscal Prudence

The Waits River Valley School (WRVS) district (Corinth and Topsham) has not experienced the double-digit tax increases or the enrollment declines that have fueled the imperative to

redistrict. Our district's fiscal stability is the result of years of disciplined lean budgeting and dedicated volunteers. That means our students forgo many of the educational extras expected by wealthier communities. For our families, high school choice is the pay-off for weathering a no-frills primary education. It is viewed as an acceptable compromise and creates an expectation of choice that is engrained in the community, and is functional bargain to contain the cost of primary education.

Choice is also a meaningful expression of family preferences and reflects the amalgamation of our residents. About half of Corinth and Topsham high schoolers attend Thetford Academy, with the balance attending Oxbow High School, in Bradford (and a few choose other schools). The scholastic orientation available to students at Oxbow High School is significantly different than that at Thetford Academy – creating balance. Neither school is expected to nor could they afford to duplicate the other. Both are valued. The result is satisfactory to the full range of families and students in our community. Choice represents a demographic framework that serves Corinth and Topsham, making them viable communities for all kinds of families. It should not be destroyed. Eliminating choice will significantly damage the economic and demographic composition of Corinth.

Should the Committees conclude that they have no viable choice but to redistribute OESU towns and restrict school choice, it should, at a minimum, add language to Act 73 and the maps thereby adopted to acknowledge the “earned” expectation of families in Corinth and Topsham to access Thetford Academy for high school and allow choice for a period that represents a generation of students. That was the original compromise of Act 73 for towns that historically tuition high school students.

Consider Community Association and Travel Patterns when Mapping.

My intention is to raise the impact of eliminating school choice, and its negative impact on the demographics of the Town of Corinth, but I thought I might offer a few observations from someone who has lived in Orange County for over 20 years.

Neither of the primary maps currently on the table reflects the reality of life in Orange County. The Conlon Map creates “District 12” that groups Corinth students with those in towns as far north as Walden and Waterford. Few residents in Corinth could tell you the last time they had been to either of those communities – no matter how charming. It brings resonance to the old saw “you can’t get there from here.” Corinth shares no geographic or cultural alignment with these communities. Yes, we are all Vermonters, but there is no practical exchange of either commercial or social nature. Residents of Corinth

are oriented “downstream,” inextricably linked to many of the towns of District 11 (e.g., Thetford, Chelsea) by county lines, commuting patterns and geography.

Similarly, the Bongartz Map isolates Corinth, Topsham, and Bradford in the “Central Area SU” away from Thetford and other neighbors. It appears to marginalize towns with lower wealth. This move will be felt and remembered as an insult because it appears inexplicable, especially if Thetford is grouped with far-flung towns like Hancock and Rochester. The functional result again is a complete lack of cohesion in the district (you truly can’t get there from here in mud season!).

As I understand it, Act 73 was a compromise that pared down the list of schools eligible to receive tuition but left historic choice towns with the ability to continue tuition to public schools or approved independent schools. The current work in Committee appears to threaten this viable compromise and in doing so threatens the composition of Corinth. I urge you to reconsider. Separating Corinth from school choice, including the balance of Oxbow High School and Thetford Academy, would be deeply destabilizing to our community.

Sincerely,

Holly Groschner

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Chair, Corinth Selectboard