

Testimony of George Steffen to Legislative Council Study Committee on Shared School District Services – August 22, 2022

My name is George Steffen and I was Superintendent of the Trevor Grade School District at the time of the consolidation with the Wilmot Grade School District and continued as Superintendent of the Trevor-Wilmot Consolidated Grade School District until my retirement in June of 2015.

In fall of 2004 superintendents and board representatives of elementary “sending districts” to Wilmot High School held informal discussions regarding consolidation with the high school district. Although nothing substantive developed from these discussions, two districts continued to talk about consolidation after discussions ended – Trevor Grade School District and Wilmot Grade School District. Each was a single building elementary district, adjacent to one another in western Kenosha County. Wilmot had an enrollment of approximately 150 students and Trevor had about 350 pupils

The two school boards met jointly numerous times over the next 18 months to map out the details of how the joint district would function, with assistance from legal counsel and the D.P.I. However, each Board also continued to meet separately in order to conduct the business of the respective districts. A financial impact study was conducted by Baird and yielded favorable results. The River Ridge District was contacted since they had consolidated Bloomington and West Grant in 1995. (This was the most recent consolidation before Trevor-Wilmot.) Their perceptions of the effects of consolidation were encouraging.

Although statute provides that, following the adoption of resolutions to consider consolidation, the affected school boards may order the school districts consolidated by adoption of resolutions ordering the consolidation, the Trevor and Wilmot Board members chose a different option. Both school boards directed the holding of a referendum in November 2005 to ask the communities if they favored consolidation. Over 70% of the voters in the Trevor District and over 70% of the Wilmot voters voted for the consolidation.

The two boards of education continued to meet both jointly and individually over the next eight months and the Trevor-Wilmot Consolidated School District was created on July 1, 2006.

The financial incentives of consolidation at that time were significant, but, in my opinion, not controlling. First, the law established a five-year hold harmless for the consolidated school district. The consolidated school district’s general school aids could not be less than the total general school aids received by the consolidating school districts in the school year prior to the consolidation. Second, an incentive was provided which spanned five years. The primary and secondary cost ceiling amounts for shared costs as well as the primary, secondary and tertiary guaranteed valuations per member were multiplied by 1.15. Additional state aid generated was outside of revenue limits. This resulted in significant additional income to the newly consolidated Trevor-Wilmot District over the next five years.

In speaking with Board members and other residents of the two districts, it became clear to me that three key questions had to be answered honestly in order for them to make an informed decision. These questions were the following:

Will the proposed consolidation be good for students?

Will the consolidation benefit both districts?

How will this affect my property taxes?

Residents determined the answers to the first two questions were a resounding “Yes” and the answer to the third was “no effect or a slight decrease”.