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**After Factfinding Report, School Board Continues to Seek Fair, Affordable Contract**

**Burlington, Vermont** —On June 30th, the Burlington School Board and the teachers' union, the Burlington Education Association (BEA), participated in a factfinding hearing, a non-binding process required by the teacher bargaining statute. The goal of the process is to generate advisory recommendations by a neutral factfinder that may shed new light on the items in dispute, and potentially serve as a framework for an eventual settlement.

At that hearing, the Board offered expert testimony documenting the unique educational needs of Burlington students, a higher compensation growth rate for Burlington teachers than for average Vermonters, recent cuts to the budget and staff, reductions in state and federal funding support, deferred maintenance of facilities in excess of \$65 million, and rapid property tax rate growth that is beginning to exceed the capacity of Burlington taxpayers. Board negotiating team member Anne Judson said, "The Board is obligated to consider these factors when negotiating with the BEA on teacher compensation. We can't negotiate salary increases in isolation from the District's other needs and funding constraints."

The factfinder's report has now been released to the public (available at [www.bsdvt.org](http://www.bsdvt.org)). Two key findings emerged from that report. The factfinder stated that previous contract language which guarantees that teacher compensation stays in the "middle of the middle" of Chittenden County districts was ill-conceived and is not sustainable. He also stated that the BEA's salary proposal was excessive and would place a financial burden on the District. At the time of the hearing, the BEA's proposal was for a 5.3% salary increase, compared to the District's proposal of 1.8%.

Unfortunately, the factfinder disregarded factors other than salary increases in surrounding school districts, and recommended a salary increase of 3.25%. The Board considers this to be out of step with present-day economic realities, especially given more than three years of very low inflation, averaging 1%. Board negotiating team member Mark Barlow noted that, "Unless other cost drivers in the contract are addressed, this recommendation could force the District to deficit spend, or cut additional programs or staff, neither of which is an acceptable option for the School Board."

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In addition, the Board views the recommendations as an insufficient basis for a settlement due to the report's silence on several key issues on the table. These include teacher contribution to health care premiums, sick leave buyouts upon retirement, graduate tuition reimbursement, and the number and use of personal days. The Board advanced these issues—not to be combative with the Union—but to assist in being able to provide regionally competitive salaries for all Burlington teachers, while still meeting its myriad of other responsibilities.

Nonetheless, the Board remains optimistic, according to Chairman Mark Porter: “With cooperation from the BEA, the Board hopes to reach a settlement that: 1) helps us meet the complex and diverse needs of all Burlington students, and 2) is affordable, sustainable, and fair to teachers and to taxpayers.”

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