



SLATE VALLEY UNIFIED UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

33 Mechanic Street, Fair Haven, VT 05743

Phone: 802.265.4905 Fax: 802.265.2158

slatevalleyunified.org

Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent

Kristin H. Benway, Director of Special Services

Cheryl Scarzello, Director of Finance

Casey O'Meara, Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment

Christopher G. Cole, Director of Operations

To: Vermont Senate Education Committee

From: Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent, Slate Valley School District

Re: School Budget Revotes

Date: March 20, 2024

For the record, I am Brooke Olsen-Farrell, a veteran educator of 25 years. I've dedicated seven years as the Superintendent of Schools in the Slate Valley Unified Union School District. I'm grateful for the chance to address the unprecedented statewide budget failures, particularly within the context of our district, which serves Fair Haven, Castleton, Benson, West Haven, and Hubbardton in Rutland County, along with Orwell in Addison County.

Unfortunately, this year our school district is among those that did not pass a budget. The results were 1004 yes to 1468 no. The budget failed by a margin of 464, the largest margin ever recorded for our district. This marks our fourth budget failure in the past five years.

The failed budget aimed to address critical needs and enhance the overall educational experience for our students. According to Act 127, our district is classified as "advantaged". We are one of the lowest-spending districts in the state, and also one of the most impoverished. Our community seems to pride itself on being at the bottom in terms of spending statewide. We always aim to be fiscally responsible and conservative. So much so that of the 107 reporting districts, Slate Valley Unified Union School District is the 16th lowest in the state, yet our community still could not support the presented budget. While the outcome was not what we had hoped for, we respect and acknowledge the democratic nature of our community.



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Our foremost priority is providing the best education for our students. Despite efforts to find alternative solutions post-failure, passing a budget in our community's current climate poses grave challenges. Over the last five years, we have reduced over 28 positions, closed a school, and experienced a decrease in education spending. Our projected homestead tax rate in FY23 was \$2.08, but due to Act 46, it was reduced to \$1.27 and it has continued to fall. While Act 46 was a partial success statewide and I dare say a success in our community, it did not go far enough, and local communities do not have the will to see it through. This would require tough decision making that must come from leadership at the top. We must address further school consolidation as a state.

Contracts for staffing need to be issued by April 1st; after that date, there will be little to no movement in staff reductions, only through attrition. If this situation persists, the only items we could consider cutting would be transportation, extracurricular activities, maintenance, and afterschool programs. However, all of these have direct negative impacts on students and drive them yet further away from equitable outcomes.

Our district has been extremely active in the community in terms of outreach and messaging, but unfortunately, the message is not resonating. Many are concerned about cost and seek tax relief, while others argue that we aren't spending enough and are depriving students of essential resources. This has polarized the community, as evidenced in our recent Finance Committee and Board Meetings. The majority of the Finance Committee opposed any budget cuts, feeling that our students would be further disadvantaged. Conversely, another board member advocated for over a 1 million dollar cut. The conversation was dynamic and emotional. Ultimately, the



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Finance Committee recommended a new budget for a vote on April 11th with a \$150,000 cut to the expenditure budget; this results in a \$1.15 Equalized Homestead Tax Rate which is a **decrease** of 1.31%, with one member dissenting. This new budget was voted on and an April 11th revote was warned at our March 18th board meeting. Our education spending per equalized pupil is slated to be \$11,321. The district directly to our north Addison Central handedly passed a budget with spending of \$16,099. This is illustrative of the huge inequities within our current state system. At this time, we have at least one board member who has stated that he will publicly advocate against the passage of the budget in the next vote and is staying true to his word. None of this is beneficial for our students, our staff or our communities.

It is the state's responsibility to provide equitable education for all students in Vermont. As a whole we are facing unprecedented challenges statewide with staff recruitment and retention, sharp increases in dysregulated students with no or very limited resources to address these needs. Our district, like many others, has a high number of students on plans such as Individualized Education Plans, 504 or EST plans, roughly 40% of our student population, again not unlike other districts in the state. Coupled with this over 20% of our instructional staff are on emergency or temporary educator licenses. The system is broken and as a school system we find ourselves caught in the middle between the public sentiment and state leadership. Questions that I would ask you to ponder:

- What are our leaders going to do to address this current crisis?
- How is the leadership going to address the inordinate amount of social services that schools have been forced to assume due to lack of capacity in community partnerships?



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There are no “waitlists” for schools to put students on. Many of their services are entitlements which schools must provide or face legal action.

- How is the school infrastructure crisis going to be addressed?
- How is the legislature going to address the real possibility that some schools may never have a passed budget?
- What does the state consider "good enough" in terms of a quality education? Are we okay with some districts spending \$16,000 per pupil while others can't pass a budget at \$11,000?
- What is the vision for public education in Vermont? Where is the leadership and support from the Agency of Education?

We all know we didn't get here overnight and I know I speak for many of my colleagues when I say we're committed to finding solutions beyond quick fixes, as some systems struggle to maintain viability, and I don't think this is hyperbole. From a crisis, opportunity can emerge—let's seize it to enact meaningful, responsible change.



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