

**THE SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION CHALLENGE, An opinion**  
from Alison Anand: career educator, business owner, former school board member. February 16, 2016

With the passage of Act 46 by the 2015 Vermont Legislature, the pressure to consolidate school districts has become front and center. Acts 153 and 156, which invited consolidation using the system known as the RED (Regional Education District), had not attracted much participation, mainly because the advantages and promises of the system seemed dubious to many people. Other states which have consolidated in recent years have had some disappointing results well documented. The RED structure originated in the southern U.S., designed to force the closing of public schools in order to privatize schools which were allowed to keep segregation. Its claims of efficiency were marketing tools.

1. **MONEY SAVINGS ARE QUESTIONABLE.** Last year Chittenden East School District did a “modified RED merger” with the town of Huntington opting out. As a Richmond resident who should have received a 3% lower tax bill due to the incentives, my present bill is only 1% lower. This means the budget increased. The merger did not deliver its promise of saving money since the 3% tax reduction was due to the temporary gerrymandering of tax rates to persuade voters to vote for the merger. Despite reduction in kitchen services to Richmond Elementary School students (about which there was much outcry in town), there is no real lasting tax relief. It seems appalling to try to save a few dollars at the expense of the nutrition of children. It is also troubling to think that other taxpayers are funding the incentives.
2. **VOTING FOR THE “RED” MEANS VOTING AWAY YOUR CONTROL OVER THE FUTURE OF YOUR SCHOOL.** The “RED” merger structure involves assuming ownership of all the assets and liabilities of the school districts. Voting for this merger means selling your school building and real estate for \$1.00. Obviously, this is a token amount, but the REAL ISSUE, is you have voted away your control over these assets. The new school board which controls all the assets, including school buildings, has a representation determined by population distribution. A small town may have only one representative on the board, which can vote that town out of its school. Think of the other consequences of having no school in town. Real estate values and other opportunities will also decline. THIS IS A CENTRAL ISSUE. The “RED” has an agenda of closing schools. This is reactionary planning to outmoded thinking, descended from a decades old backlash to the civil rights movement.
3. **FORCING THE CLOSING OF SOME SCHOOLS WILL WIDEN THE OPPORTUNITY GAP.** The growing gap between the rich and poor in this country is probably the most destabilizing force in our society. For example, by partially funding preschool, only the children of parents who can afford it will have this opportunity. Sadly, the more poor children, who probably need it most, will not have the chance. With public schools closed, the door is open for private, for profit schools to be established. These give greater opportunities to those who can afford it.
4. **CONSOLIDATION OF POWER DISENFRANCHISES THE PUBLIC.** Consolidating several school boards into one smaller board limits public participation. Larger classes mean less needed attention for students. Fewer schools with more busing means time lost and resources wasted in transportation. We should do the opposite. With the current issues of society, children need more, not less personal attention in school. We can take advantage of the internet for consolidation of learning resources while giving more personal attention to students in small schools and/or small classes. We need the most public participation possible to gather interest, ideas, contributions of time, effort, and money to give the best that we can give to our children.

5. **ACT 46 IS ALREADY BEING ALTERED.** There has been considerable uproar in Montpelier about the flaws of Act 46. However, there are no “bandaids” that can be put on this law to correct its fundamental philosophical flaws. Consolidating power, closing schools, and furthering the gap between the rich and poor will not lead to better education or a better society. It is unlikely that such poor public policy will survive the test of time. Other states which have tried consolidation have wound up with some incompatible “district marriages” and transportation messes. Maine, for example, tried to reverse consolidation in 2013 but was unable to do so because **THE TOWNS NO LONGER OWNED THEIR SCHOOLS.**
  
6. **SMALL TOWNS CAN KEEP THEIR SCHOOLS.** Act 46 does not require consolidation as long as educational standards are met. There is also an alternative way of consolidating by combining supervisory unions under their existing structure keeping schools and boards. If consolidation seems necessary or desirable in the future, there may be a different district which would be more appropriate for Huntington to join. For example, the distance to Mt. Mansfield Union High School is quite a hardship, and CVU is closer. Remembering the untiring efforts of Huntington citizens to build their own school, for those who really want to keep this school, I fervently hope that you will.

Respectfully,

Alison Anand

Your friend in neighboring Richmond and a former teacher at Brewster-Pierce Memorial School