

# VERGENNES UNION HIGH SCHOOL

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January 12, 2016

Vermont House Committee on Education  
Room 28  
Montpelier, VT 05602

Dear Legislators:

You are likely aware of the increased concern being expressed by school districts throughout Vermont. The concern results from the colliding of two State of Vermont mandates these districts are simultaneously facing: unification of school districts **and** the penalty of allowable growth caps imposed by Act 46.

Perhaps the daunting nature of this task can best be illustrated by way of analogy. If school districts were an airline, they are being asked, in essence, to rebuild their airplanes into a jumbo jet that (in theory) will be a more efficient way to fly. The school districts must “rebuild” in mid-flight. There is probably no other way around this. However, someone had the marvelous last-minute thought: “Oh, and while you’re at it, why don’t you also rebuild all these smaller airplanes in mid-flight and see if you can simultaneously eliminate (let’s pick a number) say 5% of “unnecessary” parts.” Is that any way to run a railroad, airline...or school district?

The allowable growth caps imposed by Act 46 have created a disaster of epic proportions, as evidenced by the drastic negative impact they are having on the taxpayers to provide an education with declining enrollment. In order to avoid the allowable growth cap penalty, Vergennes Union High School must cut approximately 1 million dollars from its 2017 budget. That is a 10% reduction and will result in no school run extracurricular activities, eliminating our assistant principal and our renowned choral program, a reduction in Math and Science and many other draconian cuts. The school board has already cut 12 full time equivalent positions and made other significant cuts over the last two years. Folks are beginning to talk about students leaving the school district and how we will not be able to attract young families to the area for lack of a healthy school system.

The term “cap” suggests an effort to control or moderate rising costs by establishing some parameters for containing escalating education costs (and related, escalating property taxes). But the actual result of Act 46 (as it currently exists) is not some simple benign “cap.” A “workable” cap would suggest a formula that allows for an orderly contraction of costs. Instead, we have nothing resembling that. What we have is a “cap” that is actually resulting in a “stranglehold” being placed on the budgets of school districts. “Strangleholds” are not healthy constraints. As the word suggests, programs that are the lifeblood of an education system are strangled. As such, they can ultimately lead to the death of programs that are critical to providing certain fundamental levels of quality education to Vermont children.

Let’s repeal the allowable growth caps of Act 46 so the taxpayers can afford to pay for level programming without penalty, allow the unification process to be completed without distraction and give us time to reap the benefits of Act 46 without the horrific penalty on our 2017 tax rate imposed by the allowable growth caps.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Richard Rathbun  
Clerk  
Vergennes Union High School Board