

Budgeting for 2016-2017

By Julian Portilla, Board of School Trustees

Dear friends and neighbors,

I write to you this month with a bit of a heavy heart. As a result of some of the provisions of Act 46, the board has been struggling with how to prepare for some fairly severe spending cuts in our budget for next year. As you may know, Act 46 of 2015 was passed by the Vermont Legislature in the spring. The goals of Act 46 are stated as follows:

(1) provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide; (2) lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards, adopted as rules by the State Board of Education at the direction of the General Assembly; (3) maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, with a goal of increasing the district-level ratio of students to full-time equivalent staff; (4) promote transparency and accountability; and (5) are delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.

So the state wishes to change the way schools in Vermont are governed and it wishes also to save costs for taxpayers. Both of those goals are laudable. The devil is in the details as they say. One of the motivations for the legislation is that the cost of schools has gone up while the student population has gone down. According to Act 46:

Vermont's kindergarten through grade 12 student population has declined from 103,000 in fiscal year 1997 to 78,300 in fiscal year 2015. (b) The number of school-related personnel has not decreased in proportion to the decline in student population.

The document also goes on to talk about increasing needs of children with regards to things like severe emotional needs, nutrition and poverty. It also talks about the need to simplify governance, citing the fact that there are 13 different kinds of school governance structures.

As is so often the case, Winooski does not fit the image of what might be considered a typical school in Vermont. For one thing, our student population has NOT gone down in many years. In fact, this year we have 856 students in the district, 50 more than last year. We've hovered around the 850 mark since at least 2005 when we had 794 with a high point in 2011 with 926. Current predictions based on demographic models suggest that we'll hold steady around 850 for many years to come.

At the same time we have seen an increase in students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs)—this year at about 18.6%—which require more staff support. 32% of Winooski students are ELL students. And while the presence of New Americans enriches the lives of everyone in Winooski and especially those in our school district, it does imply a slightly higher overall education cost. Consider also that without the presence of folks recently arrived in this country, Winooski might not have a school district at all.

So we've bucked the statewide trend in terms of our student population and we're above and beyond the state trend in terms of the increasing needs of our students.

Add to this that our district is a K-12 district which is exactly the model the legislature and the VT Agency of Ed want other schools to move to. There again we are both the model and the exception.

Finally, over the years, despite the challenges of a population that has higher needs than others, Winooski School District has done an exceptional job of controlling its costs. Our education spending rank is 206 out of 282 districts in the state. That means that 205 districts spend more per child than we do. Those of you who follow my updates (and who doesn't??) will know that while I'm proud to serve a district that has been frugal and wise over the years, I've also advocated that we think about increasing our commitment to our children. I know that for those on fixed incomes that doesn't sit well but our district is wonderful and unique in so many ways. Consider also that our tax rates in Winooski are among the lowest in the county and even though we are in Chittenden, our tax rate is well below the state average. The future depends on the kids in this school and we can do better for them.

Which brings me to the final part of Act 46 that affects us which is called the allowable growth percentage. The intent of this portion of the law is to control costs statewide. The equation is somewhat complicated but the idea is that depending on what you spent the last year and how it compares to those who

spent the most, your district is allowed a budget increase between 0 and 5%. In our case the equation comes to 2.75%. The impact of this section of the law in Winooski means that without programming a single increase in spending for next year, the Winooski School District cannot meet its current obligations. This is mostly due to staff salary increases negotiated in previous contracts, to increases in the costs of health care (7.9% this year alone!) and to increases in some special education expenses (required by law). What does that mean? It means we have to make deep cuts. We are trying to make cuts as far away from students as we can but given our lean budgets in years past, there are only so many places to cut before students feel the effects. As it stands now, everything is on the table: field trips, dental care, technology, athletics, staff and supplies.

More broadly, it means that this law, designed to “provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide;” is in fact freezing inequality around the state while reducing educational opportunities. The provisions restricting spending have been designed in such a way that if your community has well-funded schools, you will continue to have well-funded schools while those of us who have been more frugal and responsible with our budgets are unable to make any meaningful changes in the support we give our children. The allowable growth provision of act 46 is an example of policy making that continues the trend of punishing those at the bottom and flies in the face of the basic principle of public education: that all children deserve the same opportunities to learn and grow.

In a recent statement, the Vermont School Boards Association said:

The allowable growth percentage is flawed public policy. Expecting school boards to respond to this flawed provision jeopardizes local efforts to implement the governance provisions of Act 46, and is likely to do damage to educational quality and equity, the primary goals of the Act. The General Assembly must act within the first week of the session to repeal or delay this damaging provision before school district budgets are sent to the printer. If you have concerns about the allowable growth percentage, your local representatives and senators need to hear from you now. Ask them to take action to repeal or delay the allowable growth provision within the first week of January.

These are the people who need to hear from you if you wish to voice your opinion about Act 46 and its impact on Winooski.

- Rep. Clem Bissonnette (D) 11 Dufresne Dr., Winooski, VT 05404 655-9527
cbissonnette@leg.state.vt.us
- Rep. Diana Gonzalez (P/D) 27 LeClair St., Winooski, VT 05404 661-4053 dgonzalez@leg.state.vt.us
- Sen. Tim Ashe (D) 45 Lakeview Terrace, Burlington, VT 05401 318- 0903 tashe@leg.state.vt.us
- Sen. Philip Baruth (D) 87 Curtis Ave., Burlington, VT 05408 503-5266 pbaruth@leg.state.vt.us • Sen. Michael Sirotkin (D) 80 Bartlett Rd., So. Burlington, VT 05403 999- 4360 msirotkin@leg.state.vt.us
- Sen. Virginia “Ginny” Lyons (D) 241 White Birch Lane, Williston, VT 05495 863-6129
vlyons@leg.state.vt.us
- Sen. Diane Snelling (R) 304 Piette Rd., Hinesburg, VT 05461 482-4382 dsnelling@leg.state.vt.us
- Sen. David Zuckerman (P) 2083 Gilman Rd., Hinesburg, VT 05461 598- 1986
dzuckerman@leg.state.vt.us

I hope you’ll join me in letting our elected representatives know that the allowable growth provision of act 46 flies in the face of its stated intent, that it freezes inequality around the state and makes it harder than ever for the school district to meet the needs of Winooski’s children.