

*Dear Members of the House Education Committee,*

*Thank you for allowing me to present Our Story in Franklin Northeast.*

*FNESU is comprised of five districts; Bakersfield K-8, Berkshire K-8, Montgomery K-8, Richford School District K-12, Enosburg School District K-12. We in the Enosburg School District agreed to enter a 706(b)-study committee in August of 2015. I am a member of the Enosburg School District and Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union boards and was a member of that 706(b) study committee. It should be noted that we were not informed that upon entering a 706(b)-study committee we had “committed to a path and the exploratory phase is over” per the Agency of Education. Furthermore, that as a district board we could not remove ourselves at that point from the 706(b) committee. I resigned in frustration from this committee in December or January. Frustration that no real “studying” was being done. No answers to questions on what a merger would look like specifically, what new classes specifically would be offered, how would they be offered and at what cost. Facilitators were not neutral in exploration, which made sense after finding out the Agency of Education’s intent for 706(b) committees was to culminate in a preferred structure. Lastly in our specific instance, no effort toward encouraging public engagement to see where our communities were interested in going and no intention to do so. This made it impossible for me to support this committee’s work and I removed myself from that committee. The first actively promoted public event around Act 46 (understanding all meetings were publicly warned) was after the final plan was completely formed. At that point three meetings per district were scheduled leading up to the vote.*

*A vote held in June for a merger of all five districts was defeated in all five districts. This was voted down for different reasons in each community but overall the lack of community involvement in this process and the disconnect by design of a merged district if passed I feel was large factor. One overwhelming problem for three of our districts was the removal of choice currently held by those districts. Another was the taking on of another districts debt. An issue for all was the ambiguity of the future school closing or reconfigurations without the vote of the townspeople. For clarity, my opinion is that a Unified District hurts the identity, social culture and level of community engagement and therefore the student body.*

*Act 46 Goals by the laws intent are:*

- 1. Substantial Equity in quality and variety opportunities*
- 2. Students to meet or exceed state Ed. Quality Standards*
- 3. Maximize efficiencies*
- 4. Promote transparency*
- 5. Cost efficiencies.*

*Act 46 goals in the FNESU district can be met without disassembling the structures in our five districts. Our communities are diverse, rural and unique. The schools in our districts small in nature provide positive individualized attention to our students and our*

*challenges. It is that school community connection that supports and keeps our community members vested in our schools' successes. Larger is not better and economies of scale are not automatic. We in FNESU have long ago looked at cost saving measures within our five budgets or within the FNESU as a whole.*

*Item 1 Substantial Equity in quality and variety of opportunities lacks clarity. Do you really want cloned class opportunities in all schools across the state or diversity in offerings? Just as a teaching method does not meet every student, neither do classes and in the grand sense each school meet each student's needs. I attended a forum here in the state house on school choice. It was abundantly clear that not every school can meet each student's needs, educationally nor socially. The diversity in schools and their offerings provide a range of opportunities to the students in our state. Opening choice versus limiting options offers the most opportunity to our students. Within FNESU each of our schools reflect the strengths and needs of our individual communities who are Yes, unique and different to each other. Those local schools, with dedicated faculty, boards and parents are best equipped to answer the challenges in their community. It is often said that a key ingredient to student success is community involvement in its school. A student feels disengaged in a community when not only does the community not accept them but not accept their families as well. Our schools engage families. Our schools are often times the community center of the town. Our schools offer much more than student classes, oft times they are the center point to multi age opportunities and social programs.*

*2. Meet the State Quality Standards is something we have always been striving for and I don't see where Act 46 changes that one bit. Our boards and faculty through constant training, in district service and outside opportunities are constantly looking for the most innovative and engaging practices that show proof of success. Which I may point out that if research shows anything it cast a substantial amount of doubt around the success of consolidation!*

*3. Maximize efficiencies (presumably non-financial as that is in item #5). We in FNESU currently share to the extent we can. Changes in contract language would allow even more flexibility. Are you of the mind bigger is always better? If so you will want to look into school performance of larger vs. smaller schools, larger class sizes vs. small class sizes. I have just toured eight colleges and universities, they are promoting their small class sizes and minimizing the instances when they have large class sizes. Locally we have seen improvement in test scores relative to our smaller class sizes. I would caution that some areas of responsibility not be shared to the extent that we lose some of what we hope to gain. For instance, our custodians in our schools consider the school a reflection on themselves and are vested in the very best appearance and condition. If their obligations were diluted across five schools not even in our own town I could foresee a lack of investment beyond that required. I would presume this holds true across the state. Such is human nature. Act 46 has brought to the forefront items that we can and should tackle in our present structure such as student mobility within our district,*

*online and other technologies that enable us to expand course sharing opportunities for our students.*

*4. Promote Transparency. I cannot see where this Act will improve transparency. In fact, the level and detail that we devote during budget time I cannot see how a larger budget over five schools will have the microscopic review that is currently in place. I have said the "NASA" hammer will be able to hide in these future budgets. We have an engaged community that can question, challenge and approach any board member on a multitude of subjects in any given day. A large part of that approachability has to do with - we are neighbors. We are known and seen in our community on any given day. A new board made of representatives of five different towns will lessen the opportunity that a community member knows, sees and is comfortable with the board they would face with an issue or question. Thus lessening the instances of community engagement. School Meetings in the FNESU do not coincide with the Town meetings in our district. We have the example of community engagement BECAUSE they can make change, vote from the floor, and lend a voice and action as a community member. Either way the vote outcome, for us, the vote applied is an educated vote. Educated to the specifics and details to the money expended. They are there because they can vote. If it were just an informational meeting prior to an Australian vote history has shown us locally and unequivocally that they do not turn out for the informational meeting. They may or may not come out to vote and the voter will not be educated to the budget as they are on the floor. If the budget were to be voted down we would know why because of the conversation on the floor. Further, their participation on the floor by questioning or simply being there invests them in our local education and our schools.*

*Item 5 Cost efficiencies. We have for many years and continue to look for the ability to group buy (within our five district supervisory union) to promote cost savings. We collectively bargain within our FNESU all measures for cost savings are open to our discussion. Act 46 cost savings for our district were focused on removing choice from our choice towns and the savings they would achieve. In reality there was not much else. We would save on a doing one audit vs. five. Board stipends, which believe me minimal, a few dollars here and there. I do believe progress on this differentiates depending on the district we just happen to be in front of this movement.*

*So this brings me to the crux of Act 46 and how I think H15 can help to some degree the damage that Act 46 inflicts on Vermont, its heart and soul, self-governance.*

*Democracy at state and local levels are being severely challenged by Act 46. H15 will extend timelines for thorough studies and conversations. Anyone who has been involved in this at a community level can attest to the questions and scenarios not anticipated when Act 46 was debated on the floor and ultimately passed. The fact that we are here today attests to the complexity of this issue that cannot and should not be rushed through. To be honest the voters of this state were lulled into a false sense of calm around conversations of merger. I have been on the board for about fourteen years. Conversations around educational governance have been going on for much of that time.*

Each time the public was truly engaged and considered the collective voice was in dissent of such action. Frankly, we became complacent. And why should these voices not matter. They should. It is their voices, our voices, our children, their future and ours that hangs in balance. Consider nationally Vermont does very well with its education. The true issue here is COST, MONEY! So, to be honest about the drive behind this – the reason all those constituents are clamoring year after year is the cost. Not the cost to Vermont as a whole, but the cost in their taxes. Their tax bill. So here are some projections going out to fiscal year 2023. With changes in structure and projected savings plus the temporary tax incentives Enosburg Tax Payers can expect on a \$150,000 home \$303 saved in taxes. That is \$303 savings **cumulative** in 6 years. Your highest year of savings would be \$78 worth maybe a dinner out on the town. Doesn't sound substantive by any stretch of the imagination. Richford would save \$518 in that time period. The effect on Enosburg Taxpayers is miniscule and it will not stop the clamoring. Act 46 was initially being sold and promoted as saving money, maybe some of you bought into that sales pitch. As realization sunk in then the song changed and purposefully moved away from the money. However, the money is why the pressure you have felt from your constituency and when the realization hits and they don't see that change in their personal tax bill then the clamoring and additional distrust will set in. H15 will not resolve the cost but obviously, it seems Act 46 is here to stay. H15 will give some time to figure out how to do the least damage. The goals in Act 46 are commendable however the Agency overreach is deplorable. H15 can give communities the time and flexibility to propose plans to meet the goals of efficiencies, transparency and equity. It should also give time for the state to further define and adjust the implementation to NOT take away choice and to not decimate local governance which has been a source of pride to Vermont. We do not want to be like any other state, why would we? Do we want to be where Maine is trying to figure out the exit ramp off of consolidation? After ten years of consolidation Maine has provided no long term efficiencies – the money saved at the school level went into increased central office budgets. .

We are truly a diverse state with nothing that fits neither all nor a few to fit many. The complexities for communities socially and geographically are obviously no easy answer. In an effort to find a plan that fits, meets Act 46 goals and molds into the Agency of Ed structures is futile. Requiring those opting for a preferred plan and those in an alternative plan to meet different criteria is abusive. Clearly it can be seen that each plan should meet the same threshold. It follows that incentives should as well follow that same fair path but as they are temporary in nature the true issues go well beyond the disparity in incentive money.

Lastly, it has been suggested to us in FNESU that when the rubber hits the road the Agency of Ed. will put us into a structure if we have not proposed and approved one in line with the Agency of Ed. wishes. However, if we have brought to vote a structure that ultimately gets voted down by our districts, this will not be the structure that Agency of Ed. will force upon us. Ultimately this puts our boards in a position of gamesmanship. If we were to suggest to our voters a side by side which we feel may very well get voted down, then in essence it takes off the table the next best option for our district schools. We should be able to best represent our (the Boards) constituency in regards to the education of their children. Our districts are constantly improving our schools and

*engaging our communities. Act 46 will eviscerate our communities to no meaningful end. Your constituents will still be clamoring for tax relief which I feel needs to be answered with how we fund education not how we educate.*

*Lastly I have heard merged districts feel this deadline should not be extended as it would hurt them??? How could it hurt them? They have hopefully entered into the best option for their district. They have received tax incentives the rest of us are paying for, so I fail to see the harm done to them? If they have felt pressured with no choice to enter into their merged situation which I can certainly see happening then indeed they should be offered an exit plan to look further into what is indeed best for their districts without penalty hanging over their deliberations. This has been a very strong armed process. There are some here that will say for instance that choice has not been taken away. But it is very easy to see that many may feel they have no choice but to enter into agreement that is the lesser of two evils. Is that really a choice?*

- 1. Pass H15*
- 2. Level the playing field*
- 3. Preserve choice*
- 3. Allow us to study all options equally - we have studied and rejected preferred; now we want to study traditional and alternative.*
- 4. Expect the same requirements regardless of structure*
- 5. Fix the timelines so we can make progress*

*A better bill would reward outcomes, not just structures. There should be tax incentives for districts that provide solid evidence of establishing enhanced, long term efficiencies and improved quality and equity, regardless of how they do it. We shouldn't be giving tax breaks for doing nothing except getting rid of our local school boards. Different communities can achieve those goals in different ways, but the premium should be on collaboration, cooperation and innovation. Consolidation is fine for those for whom it works. But it is a mistake to ignore the possibilities and concrete data of districts with a better idea.*

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