

TESTIMONY TO VERMONT STATE LEGISLATURE

Re: Proposed bills to Amend Act 46

April 4, 2017

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you regarding the issue of school consolidation, a matter which has been very troubling to me for several years. Acknowledging that Act 46 has brought about some very substantive discussions around the state about how we could improve our education system, I would like to suggest a MORATORIUM ON MERGERS for at least one year for the following reasons.

1. The communities who have completed mergers are the ones for whom the system was expected to work better than the previous one. We need to take the time to find out the results of the change for the existing mergers. Did they accomplish the promised savings and efficiency? Do community members miss the school boards? Has community participation in the school been affected?
2. Some communities went along with the mergers because they felt threatened by Act 46. They were made afraid that the state would force them to merge if they did not first do it themselves.
3. Another manipulating factor has been the tax incentives to communities which accomplished mergers within a short period of time. On December 9, 2016, the Burlington Free Press reported that the tax incentives for mergers had already cost \$10,000,000! This had an effect on everyone's tax rate, with the non merging communities bearing an unfair burden. How can the Legislature justify taking ten million dollars from the education budget which is needed for children?
4. These are dangerous tactics when federal civil rights laws prohibit threats and bribes of voters. Remember that when a community loses its school, people do not want to live there. This begins a downward spiral of destruction of the town economy and social atmosphere. A community showing damage from Act 46 could possibly sue the state.
5. Those communities, which after thoughtful discussions have not yet merged because of misgivings, have good reasons for not wanting to consolidate. Issues such as debt combination, disposition of real estate, transportation problems, and a variety of other concerns were not well thought out in Act 46.

The assumption that consolidation is good for everyone is severely flawed. I urge the Legislature to stop the process for a given period of time to assess the success or lack thereof of the existing mergers. Please also find a press release which I sent last June to a number of newspapers around the state when many communities were voting on mergers.

Thank you for your consideration.

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