

Act 46 Testimony—House Education Committee

April 4, 2017

Good Evening. My Name is John Castle. I am the Superintendent of Schools for North Country Supervisory Union. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to your considerations regarding Act 46.

The goals of the law are nothing new—many, if not most boards and school leaders have strived to fulfill the goals of equity, quality, efficiency, and transparency for years. The “attempt of the law” is to portraint that centralized governance is necessary to achieve these goals in the most cost effective manner. The belief that centralized governance will automatically result in achieving the stated goals, or is what our communities want, is a false assumption and demonstrates an absence of research, lack of understanding of how school systems operate and how they are connected to our communities. Essentially, community members trust those closest to their children to make decisions regarding their children.

I am here to encourage you to affirm the “intent of the law” with regard to flexibility around governance. Although S.122 may provide some flexibility, it seems like tinkering with the law to further push square pegs into round holes. H.15 does go further in providing additional flexibility, but does not provide the clarity needed. In fact, merely affirming the intent of the language of the law would go a long way to assuring true flexibility. The law states:

Alternative structure: supervisory union with member districts. An Education District as envisioned in subsection (b) of this section may not be possible or the best model to achieve Vermont’s education goals in all regions of the State. In such situations, a supervisory union composed of multiple member districts, each with its separate school board, can meet the State’s goals.

As written, it is hard to take the intent of the legislature as anything other than to support supervisory unions. It is recognized that a supervisory union must demonstrate they are collectively responsible for all students, maximizes efficiencies through economies of scale and flexible management, and operates with the fewest number of districts practicable. Legislative drift and bending the intent of the law to push for only the preferred model or permutations of to allow the Legislature to declare victory with universal centralization is not responsible or reflective of what many of our communities want.

The fact that the law relies so heavily on carrots and sticks is a strong indicator of its lack of merit based on what the law hopes to achieve. If governance along could achieve what is intended without incentives, pragmatic Vermonters would have done so. A supervisory union can demonstrate that they are able to meet Vermont Educational Quality Standards in a way through a collaborate approach that still maintains local boards.

There is no question that we have examples of inequity between schools in supervisory unions. However, larger inequities exist between supervisory unions or unified districts based not only on discrepancies in learning opportunities, but also based on need. If the Legislature were fully committed to addressing inequity, then I would be here right now testifying in support of a bill that increases the weighting for poverty. If you are modify language of Act 46, modify the language to ensure small, rural schools with high poverty will continue to receive small schools grants under an alternative structure.

I don't think any of us would suggest that our country move toward a fully centralized government (without state legislators) with merely three members of Vermont representing us in Washington. Nor, do I envision New England states establishing a unified states model. If our State was founded on Freedom and Unity, why cannot those in Montpelier trust us to govern under a supervisory union model. We are at a time in our country and State's history where we should be reaffirming democratic principals and fostering increased civic engagement, not diminishing such. Perhaps one of the goals of the law should have been about increasing local engagement and voter participation? That's one of our goal.

Our communities are not persuaded by a sales pitches or threats because they trust those closest to their children to make the decisions that are truly in the best interest of their children and their community.