

4/4/17 Pamela Fraser, Barnard School Board Alternative Structures Subcommittee

Statement on S.122

My name is Pamela Fraser and I am a member of a newly formed Alternative Structures Subcommittee in Barnard. I sincerely thank you for taking testimony on S.122. The definition of Alternative Structures is a critical issue for us.

Our school Barnard Academy is a well performing and fiscally responsible district that voted down a conventional merger proposal, one that would have tethered us to a larger district that intended to make cuts to our school and none to their own. I suppose cuts are part of the point of consolidation, so my position may fall on deaf ears. But it is relevant to understanding why we rejected a merger, and why we need more options. It made no sense to target a school like ours for reductions; one with strong academic performance, innovative and outstanding programming, the wherewithal to keep per-pupil spending among the lowest in our SU, a student/teacher ratio among the highest in the SU, and one of few districts in our SU that has not had declining enrollment over the past decade. While many of us lobbied our Act 46 Study Committee for a fairer merger proposal, we were not able to overcome the power a larger town wielded in the planning process, in their insistence on a plan without shared sacrifice.

As we now explore possible Alternative Structures, we are hoping for a bill that increases flexibility in allowable governance structures as long as the goals of Act 46 are met. It should be said that we work toward and largely achieve the goals of Act 46 as a matter of course; quality, equity, transparency, accountability, creating operational efficiencies, and fiscal responsibility to our taxpayers are our goals. We have a great school and we happily embrace fair-minded opportunities for improvements. We eagerly anticipated legislative clarification in the hope it would expand our options by lifting restrictive language and making new relationships easier to create, but S.122 actually contains nothing that helps us. It is a list of acceptable preferred structures that reads as if written to help specific towns, and none of it pertains to us. A bill that opens up options broadly to all districts where preferred merger plans have not provided acceptable options, would help us. We need it to be less onerous to consider merger arrangements outside of our SU, for example. Why should this ability sunset? H/S.15 seemed to open up more paths, especially with eliminating the notion that Alternative Structures is inherently inferior to preferred structures. We'd like to be able to gauge the feasibility of a proposal to retain current governance structure, which is mentioned as an option in the law yet many legislators have said things that seem to contradict that possibility.

A terrific school like ours should not be cornered or forced into a merger that diminishes the quality and equity of education for students in Barnard, when increased quality and equity are goals of the law, or punished for refusing it. Please help us by considering legislation that doesn't prescribe a finite number of narrow options but defines Alternative Structures in a way that is truer to the statement that "Act 46 is not one-size-fits-all".