

To: House Education Committee Member
Representative David Sharpe, Chair

On Tuesday of this week, in Room 11 in the Statehouse for a hearing on S.122 in connection with Act 46, it was an unprecedented scene. Filled to overflowing with residents from towns all around Vermont, they came to express their concern...not just about S.122, a Bill intended to lend some flexibility to Act 46 for towns needing to merge or wanting to merge, but also to express a desire for the House to consider again, H.15. Residents of towns looking to follow a different path in meeting the goals set forth in the Act and wanting a return to greater flexibility and more time, as expressed in H.15, to do their work. Just to reiterate...

Here is a sampling of what you, as members of the House Education Committee, should have heard:

- **From Westminster:** 'It is clear that we need to pursue alternatives so that we can achieve the goals of the Act, but in a way that works for our children and our community....' I hope the legislature can reaffirm their support for flexible options to meet the goals of Act 46 as outlined in the original legislation. H.15 was supportive of districts exploring options; S.122 does not.
- **From Putney:** 'This merger proposal law(Act 46) is tearing our Supervisory Union apart'
- **From Richmond:** 'Some people have voted for mergers because they felt threatened by Act 46.'.....'Remember that when a community loses its school, people do not want to live there.'...'Vermont citizens know there is more than one way to 'skin a cat' and they are ready to show the state they can restructure their governance to meet the goals'...'They want to do it their way.'
- **From Peacham:** 'Without flexibility Act 46 will result in Governance structure trumping educational performance.'
- **From South Royalton:** Royalton voters are not anti consolidation so much as the law doesn't allow us to work with our neighboring schools.'
- **From Strafford:** 'All of the so called 'carrots' of Act 46, the tax incentives and grants, are tied to the reorganization of school districts and school boards.'.....'None of them are tied to actual, realized educational outcomes or documented savings'...S.122 does nothing to help these towns pursue truly substantive alternatives that bring about real progress toward the goals of the Act.'
- **From Waterville:** 'The will of the people in our rural communities is NOT in favor of merging without protections and mutual respect.'...'Waterville would have one voice on a board of 13 and will not have the ability to influence what is best for our school'...
- **From Reading:** 'We need more time to craft a plan.'...'We need legislation that will give us ample time to explore our options and vet them with our community.'

- **From Barnard:** 'My study group is now an official sub-committee of our school board....we seek to not only meet the goals of Act 46, but exceed them, as we consider ways to strengthen our school by working hard in our town and also by collaborating with others.'....'It matters that we have a voice; it matters that we can make the most of our school; and it matters to all of us here that Vermont remain a place that people move to and people come back to and people stay.'
- **From Calais:** 'Many of the towns that have resisted or voted down mergers actually support the goals of Act 46 and the charge to focus on and change our governance model to reach those goals'....'those towns want the opportunity to do it their way.'
- **From Dummerston:** 'Vermont ranks high nationally and internationally in education(performance)...This is because communities with their elected school board know their students and what they need.'
- **From Wells River:** 'the proposed changes under S.122 may not offer us a way forward...School districts should be given the autonomy under the law to achieve its goals in the best way possible for them; 'one size does not fit all'.
- **From Barnard:** As we now explore 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.'....'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 these are goals of the Law.' H.15 seemed to open up more paths'... to [getting to where we want to be.]
- From North Country Supervisory Union: 'affirming the intent of the language of the law would go a long way to assuring true flexibility'...'if you modify language in Act 46, modify it to ensure small, rural schools with high poverty will continue to receive grants under an alternative structure.'....'If our State was founded on Freedom and Unity, why cannot those in Montpelier trust us to govern under a supervisory union model?'

The theme throughout this hearing seemed to be....(Please)...give us more flexibility to design our path toward meeting the goals; give us more time to do this; and do not judge us unfairly because we do not merge or fail to eliminate our local school board. This effort to achieve the goals of creating more efficient operations or increasing educational opportunities for children while cutting costs should be based on collaboration....not consolidation. The objective here should be GOALS....not Governance.

Clearly, a return to consideration of H.15 and the extension of the original timelines are crucial for towns undertaking....only now, in many cases, since the task which, according to Sec. 9 in the Law belongs to the school boards. Since passage of Act 46 for many towns....alternative paths have not been an option for 706b Study Committees only models for mergers.

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you, again, the sentiments from this wonderfully enthusiastic and dedicated group of Vermonters who are seeking to do what they feel is best for their communities.

Richard Virkstis, Dummerston