

February 23, 2017

Jay E. Denault

Retired School Board Chairman; Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7

Retired Board Chairman; Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union

“ACT 46 TESTIMONY, HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE”

I've had the good fortune of living in the Town of Franklin for the last 42 years, although by Franklin standards I'm still a “newcomer”. Ours is a community which by necessity has become very adept at prioritizing the important issues facing our Town. It hasn't always been financially easy because we are not a “rich” community. So you can imagine when we agree to spend taxpayer's money it is for the right reasons, and with the highest of expectations. With this in mind our local school stands as a proud example of one of those important undertakings, the successful education of our youth. There is an overwhelming sense of community pride both within our Town, and in Towns who's parents choose to send their children to our school.

The AOE is well aware of the successful Franklin Central school by choosing it as one of the top three performing schools in the State to be featured in the October 2009, “Roots of Success” study of effective practices in Vermont schools. This was a case study on poverty, and effective schools based on our high achievement of both low income students and their peers. The AOE noted, Franklin's experience in working to close achievement gaps and ensuring positive outcomes for all students. When the Vermont Business Roundtable was recognizing successful schools based on Statewide assessments, Franklin Central was named a medallion school in 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, and the top Gold Medallion school in 2002. (The Business Roundtable stopped giving these awards in 2008) In 2007, our Franklin Central school was awarded the Department of Education Camel's Hump Silver award for “Significant achievement in creating and fostering a healthy school environment”. In 2009 the Franklin Central school was awarded first place for it's application to the Fit and Healthy Kids School Awareness awards. In 2011 our Franklin Central school was named one of 14 “effective” schools in the State by the Vermont Department of Education for high achievement for all students based on a three year study. Our school was one of only 3 schools in 2012, in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties to meet AYP towards all students performing at grade level by 2014.

As of November 2, 2016 Franklin Central school is ranked 3rd out of 176 Vermont school districts, and is the top performing PreK-6 school district based on Statewide assessments and NECAP science scores. (see attached Schooldigger district ranking documentation) Amazingly Franklin's per pupil costs have remained at the lowest level in the State year after year made necessary by the financial strains felt by this substantially impoverished community. Note; The number of Franklin students eligible for free and reduced lunch is reported to be 36.9%. If you visit our Franklin Central school you will witness numerous adults working with our students and might conclude that our annual budget must include large labor expenses. However, a closer look will reveal that more than half of those adults are enthusiastic community volunteers. As one of many examples of community involvement. Local businessmen enjoy taking the time to visit our school each year to set up an apple cider press in of all places, the library to teach students the art of making apple cider. How many schools in Vermont have a Principal who insists on teaching a spelling class of her own, or takes the time to recognize the teaching value of implementing activities such as a school chess club?

In fact, another group of community members activated our Town's “Recreation Department” who lists as one of their priorities, the organization of an athletics program on behalf of our school regarding Basketball, Soccer, and Baseball. Local community members have donated the large tract of land directly behind our school which is the location of our school's three Baseball Diamonds, Doug-outs, seating, and Soccer field, all of which were built, and currently maintained by countless volunteers at no expense to the school. In the front of the Franklin school you will see the impressive community

playground which was also funded, built, and maintained by a large group of volunteers. To the right of our school you will see the Franklin Volunteer Fireman Barbeque pit which together with the school is the site of the famous Franklin Volunteer Fireman's Annual Chicken Barbeque, not to be outdone by the Franklin Volunteers Fireman's equally famous annual Pancake Breakfast held at the school during the spring sugaring season.

The Franklin Central school continues to be a leader of innovative thinking for several years now, driven by financial frugal necessity. Franklin Central school for at least the last eight years has been sharing a Guidance counselor with the Montgomery elementary school district, which is located outside of our Supervisory Union, as well as sharing Music, and Physical Education teachers with the Sheldon school district. The Franklin pre-school program was developed with money donated by a local community member and accepts children from other Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union schools at no cost. In keeping with the idea of maintaining a low per pupil cost the staff at Franklin Central school takes full advantage of all the resources within walking distance located in our Town to enhance our educational program such as frequent Field trips to our local historic Haston Library which continuously offers coordinated student activities. Even our senior citizens living in the nearby Homestead/Carriage House retirement home often enjoy visits from our students armed with gifts which were created as part of the learning experience at the Franklin Central school.

To add to all this, our school is much more than a building filled with desks, books, chairs, pencils, and paper. Community members often use our school as a means of making anonymous donations of cash to fellow citizens who can't afford to buy their children a much needed new pair of shoes, a winter coat, or gifts under the family Christmas tree. Our school each year conducts a very successful food drive on behalf of the local food shelf by creating a school competition which teaches our students compassion for those of us who are less fortunate.

We have a school which instills the honor of randomly selecting two children each morning to recite the pledge of allegiance, while another two are randomly selected for the daily raising of our POW, State and Nation's flags right out front of our school. The Franklin Central school teaches students the value of maintaining old traditions. Two Students are randomly selected each morning to ring the huge antique "school house bell" salvaged from our historic old school house, permanently mounted in the foyer of our school, announcing to the entire Town that school is now in session.

I'm telling you all this because maintaining the culture of our school is extremely important to all the citizens of Franklin. The Franklin Central school without any doubt is the social economic pillar of our Town, which the citizens of Franklin are not willing to place at risk. It is impossible to expect that those of you here in Montpelier can be fully aware of how important our school is to our community and to the well being of our children. To quote our former and current Secretary of Education "What ever we do we must keep in mind what is in the best interest of our children," This happens to be one of the things I can honestly say that I agree on with Secretary Holcombe.

I have no doubt that Act 46 in some areas of our State makes a lot of sense. As a participating community member I can assure you that our Act 46 independent study committee has been working diligently in search of a solution. We have attempted to piece together multiple combinations, and although we have not been able to form a viable plan the discussions has been frequent, and intense. We have covered a lot of new ground, learned a great deal about our current capabilities, and how to look more creatively for answers. The implementation of Act 46 creates uncertainty as to whether Franklin will be forced into a preferred merger, or some other combination. Either way, with all due respect Act 46 is seen as a threat by the citizens of Franklin in their desire to maintain what has been proven year after year to be a highly successful, financially efficient local school.

Act 46 Franklin issues;

1) In a preferred merger, Franklin will be required to eliminate five of it's current six school board members, three of which serve our local school, and three who serve our union#7 district school. The new consolidated school board will be comprised of four Swanton members, two Highgate members,

and one Franklin member due to required proportional representation. This will immediately trigger the destruction of a very fragile relationship between Swanton, Highgate, and Franklin created by the elimination of a long standing agreement to maintain equal representation on our Union #7 district school board. This issue took over ten years to resolve, as a prerequisite to forming the Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7. This highly politically charged relationship should not be underestimated, and is so tense that it's dismantling is a powder keg waiting to explode. This situation has more than once raised it's ugly head, more recently with the controversial issues relate to the Highgate sports arena and the Swanton Missisquoi Valley Rescue service. It resulted in re-igniting high levels of resentment between Swanton, Highgate, and to a lesser degree Franklin, creating extremely destructive trust issues for the Towns of the FNWSU.

2) Franklin will become an insignificant member of a new consolidated school board, with all future decisions regarding absolutely every aspect of our Franklin school being made by a board dominated by the Swanton majority.

3) Franklin will be required to enter into a legally binding agreement to sell all it's educational assets to the new consolidated school board for one dollar. Current Swanton representatives are well aware of the disproportional authority granted them by an Act 46 merger, such as the ability to vote to relocate Franklin students to Swanton. Even if Franklin were successful in getting the two Board members from Highgate to support them, we would still be unable to stop such an action as Swanton would hold the Board's voting majority. It may not be the intention of Act 46 to close small schools, but that is exactly what will happen here in Franklin, creating devastating consequences for our Town. Franklin voters lack the confidence in "Articles of Agreement" designed to protect our school from this sort of action which can be amended by 16 VSA 706(n), and given what we stand to lose, the Franklin community is not willing to take the risk based on some untested legalese.

4) Act 46 provides the new consolidated school board with several options regarding the future use of our vacated building including but not limited to returning it for the Franklin community to decide what to do with our empty building. If this should occur after July 1, 2017 Franklin will become liable for refunding \$311,000.00 in State construction aid, and an unspecified percentage of the selling price with the latter being delayed by amendment for a period of five years. Given the fact that the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board has targeted empty school buildings as prime retrofit candidates, it is conceivable the new consolidated school board could decide to provide our vacated school to be converted into a low income housing project.

5) Of the five schools located within the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union, Franklin Central school is the only one not in "Required Corrective Action". Franklin having never been placed in "Required Corrective Action", would be required to merge with identified failing schools ranging from eight to ten years, without having in place the required "Continuous School Improvement Plans".

6) Franklin having one of the lowest education spending per equalized pupil in the State will be forced to merge with schools with significantly higher equalized per pupil costs resulting in an increase in excess of \$1,300.00 per pupil for the taxpayers of our community. (see attached equalized per pupil cost documentation)

7) In consideration of Franklin's seriously reduced representation, our voting taxpayers will be held hostage regarding all future spending, providing the Town of Swanton the ability to directly affect the tax rate of Franklin citizens.

Our Act 46 study committee considered the formation of a merger involving the Swanton School District, the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union, and Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7. This theoretically would leave the Highgate, and Franklin districts to consider a "side by side". However we were informed by the AOE that given our situation this would not be legally possible without Highgate agreeing to merge with Swanton, M.V.U. and The FNWSU. This of course would leave Franklin searching for options and would most likely result in Franklin being forced in at a later

date. To make things more complicated our fourth Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union member the Sheldon School District is a K-8 with school choice 9 through 12, and is being left isolated.

In closing, an Act 46 merger will impair Franklin's ability to meet or exceed the stated goals to "lead students to achieve or exceed the state's education quality standards, to maximize operational efficiencies, and increase the district level ratio of student to full time equivalent staff, to promote transparency and accountability, to deliver at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value, and to provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities. Franklin is left with no options and for the sake of continuing to provide our children with a high quality education given our situation, we must legitimately oppose the effects of an Act 46 merger at this time.

It is easy to find fault, or criticize something you don't like. The real challenge is to find a sensible solution. In this case I believe there is such a solution, which is consistent with State law and the quoted commitment to "keep the best interest of our students in mind". Therefore, I respectfully ask you to give serious consideration to the following recommendation; "After a school district having completed a legitimate, and comprehensive study of the pros and cons of an Act 46 merger, should it be determined that a merger will cause harm to the students, and or the taxpayers of said district the state AOE, after careful review of the evidence shall provide a viable option to that school district". For the sake of our children and our Town, I implore you to please don't provide the means to tear the heart and soul out of our Franklin community.

Vermont Agency of Education

This information is included in each of the Annual Reports in a State AOE Report entitled “Three Prior Years Comparison”

FY 2015 Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil

Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7.....	\$12,709.00
Highgate Elementary School District.....	\$13,761.00
Swanton Elementary School District.....	\$12,605.00
Franklin Elementary School District.....	\$11,202.00
Average Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,569.00
Act 46 merged Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,569.00
Franklin increase.....	\$1,367.00

FY 2016 Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil

Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7.....	\$13,354.00
Highgate Elementary School District.....	\$13,324.00
Swanton Elementary School District.....	\$12,790.00
Franklin Elementary School District.....	\$11,263.00
Average Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,683.00
Act 46 merged Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,683.00
Franklin increase.....	\$1,420.00

FY 2017 Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil

Missisquoi Valley Union High School District #7.....	\$13,625.00
Highgate Elementary School District.....	\$12,723.00
Swanton Elementary School District.....	\$13,140.00
Franklin Elementary School District.....	\$11,684.00
Average Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,793.00
Act 46 merged Education Spending Per Equalized Pupil.....	\$12,793.00
Franklin increase.....	\$1,109.00



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Vermont School District Rankings

Updated Wednesday, September 21, 2016, based on the 2015-16 school year test scores.

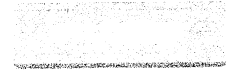
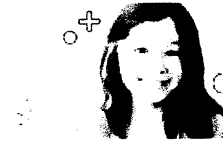
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Rank (of 176)	District	Grades	# Elementary Schools	# Middle Schools	# High Schools	# Alt. Schools	Rank score (2016)	Rank (2015)	Rank change from 2015	SchoolDigger Rating (2016)
1 st	Underhill Town School District	PK, KG-4	1	0	0	0	0.994	9	8	A+
2 nd	Norwich School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.977	1	1	A+
3 rd	Franklin School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.96	28	25	A+
4 th	Stowe School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	1	0.955	10	6	A+
5 th	South Burlington School District	PK, KG-12	3	1	1	0	0.955	14	9	A+
6 th	Bolton School District	PK, KG-4	1	0	0	0	0.954		(n/a)	A+
7 th	Strafford School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.944	33	26	A+
8 th	Corwall School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.943	13	5	A+
9 th	Shelburne School District	PK, KG-8	1	0	0	0	0.942	7	2	A+



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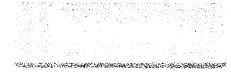
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Rank (of 176)	District	Grades	# Elementary Schools	# Middle Schools	# High Schools	# Alt. Schools	Rank score (2016)	Rank (2015)	Rank change from 2015	SchoolDigger Rating (2016)
121 st	Starksboro School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.351	115	6	C
122 nd	Randolph School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.345	161	39	C
123 rd	Hyde Park School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.339	143	20	C
124 th	Eden School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.333	137	13	C
125 th	Newark School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.322		(n/a)	C
126 th	Highgate School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.316	96	30	C
127 th	Vernon School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.31	131	4	C
128 th	Manchester School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.31	66	62	C
129 th	Mill River USD #40	7-12	0	0	1	0	0.309	74	55	C
130 th	Westminster School District	PK, KG-8	1	0	0	0	0.305	100	30	C



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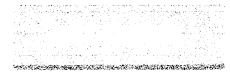
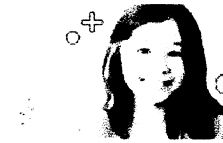


Rank (of 176)	District	Grades	# Elementary Schools	# Middle Schools	# High Schools	# Alt. Schools	Rank score (2016)	Rank (2015)	Rank change from 2015	SchoolDigger Rating (2016)
151 st	Bethel School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	1	0	0.183	152	1	
152 nd	Saint Albans Town School District	PK, KG-8	1	0	0	0	0.18	139	13	
153 rd	Derby School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.178	110	43	
→ 154 th	Missisquoi Valley UHSD #7	7-12	0	0	1	0	0.173	174	20	
155 th	Johnson School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.172	163	8	
156 th	Waits River Valley USD #36	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.17	145	11	
157 th	Fair Haven School District	PK, KG-8	1	0	0	0	0.159	121	36	
158 th	Lakeview USD #43	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.155	111	47	
159 th	Saint Johnsbury School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.155	158	1	
160 th	Athens/Grafton Contract School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.149	160		

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161 st	Richford School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	1	0	0.139	166	5	
162 nd	Springfield School District	PK, KG-12	2	1	1	0	0.138	171	9	
163 rd	Lamoille UHSD #18	7-12	0	1	1	1	0.137	167	4	
164 th	Brandon School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.121	126	38	
→ 165 th	Sheldon School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.114	154	11	
166 th	Otter Valley UHSD #8	7-12	0	0	1	0	0.108	144	22	
167 th	Randolph UHSD #2	7-12	0	0	1	1	0.101	165	2	
168 th	Millers Run USD #37	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.098	155	13	
169 th	Orange School District	PK, KG-12	1	0	0	0	0.087	179	10	
→ 170 th	Swanton School District	PK, KG-6	1	0	0	0	0.086	169	1	

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