

House Education Committee
January 25, 2017
Act 46 of 2015

Jeffrey Francis
Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Act 46 of 2015

The Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) supported the enactment of Act 46 of 2015.

The Act is generally consistent with a position adopted by the Association in 2007 supporting the establishment of school districts governed by single boards, each with the authority and responsibility to develop and maintain policy that ensures a structure for management and accountability.

In 2007, VSA supported the establishment of single Pre-k to grade 12 districts because of the opportunities seen for:

- Provision of a stronger continuum of learning for all students
- Better alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment across grade levels and schools
- Encourage/support more involvement of students, parents and communities (due to more consistent delivery structures)

In 2010, VSA supported the enactment of Act 153, which, among other things, created a construct for unification of school districts on a voluntary basis and established a requirement that certain education services, such as special education, be delivered by the supervisory union. The proposal for the requirement responded to the fact that resources available to districts within a

supervisory union were being deployed unevenly across the supervisory union. In other words, excess capacity in one district was not being shared in a neighboring district.

Post implementation of Act 153, we often hear unsolicited that special education services are now more equitably available and more cost-effectively delivered through the frameworks established under Act 153.

With respect to the Act 153 unification provisions, few school districts took advantage of the opportunities provided. Only a collection of districts in the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union (forming the Mountain Town Regional Education District) and within the Chittenden East Supervisory Union (the Mount Mansfield Modified Union School District) moved forward with unification.

Meanwhile, the education practice and policy agenda for public education in Vermont extended well beyond questions of school governance and organization. In a presentation to the General Assembly in January 2015, Education Secretary Rebecca Holcombe emphasized that the current and future emphasis for the education delivery system was proficiency, personalization and focus, and supporting the continuous learning and growth of educators.

Indeed, just prior to 2015, the General Assembly had enacted Act 166 – Universal Access to PreK Education – and Act 77, the Flexible Pathways law.

Also in her presentation, Secretary Holcombe noted that our challenge was to “ensure that our system delivers (on all of its goals, aspirations and obligations) in an equitable and affordable way.”

Secretary Holcombe’s presentation also shed a light on an array of additional data of interest and concern to policy makers. For example:

- Because of small school size, many schools and supervisory unions receive limited performance data
- There was tremendous variability in performance data statewide

- Leadership turnover is an extreme problem in some regions of the state and for some systems
- From FY1997 to FY2014, Pre-K enrollment decreased from 103,898 to 82,593
- Numbers of teachers and paraeducators did not decline during the same period
- Staff-to-student ratio lowest in the country
- Some schools reducing programs while costs rose annually

In short, after grappling with those factors and more, the General Assembly's response was to enact Act 46 of 2015. Simply stated, the underlying goal was to create unified systems of schools with a single governance model and offer significantly more opportunity to manage and share resources under a one-board, one-budget model. The law is intended to achieve greater equity in opportunity and, over time, a more sustainable cost structure.

Since it Act 46 was signed into law in 2015, we have seen:

- Voters in 58 towns in 14 SUs voted to merge 66 school districts into 13 unified union school districts (PK-12) and 1 modified unified union school district ("MUUSD").
- Voters in 3 SUs did not approve proposals to merge a total of 20 school districts: Addison-Rutland (5Y: 1N); Franklin NE (0Y: 5N); and Orleans Central (1Y: 6N).
- Voters in Barre Town are going to reconsider their vote on the unification of the Barre Supervisory Union at the end of this month.
- In December, the State Board approved 5 new proposals to create unified union school districts. In January, the Board approved 4 additional merger proposals. Each approved proposal will be presented to the voters on Town Meeting Day 2017.

The Vermont Superintendents Association collaborates with the Vermont School Boards Association and the Vermont School Boards Insurance Trust on a project to support merger study committees in their work to develop merger proposals.

We routinely hear that while the work is challenging, the process of analyzing and responding to the options available under the law typically results in a proposal for a unified system better able to use resources in support of more promising educational opportunity for students.

Our Act 46 project is now also working with unified systems in their efforts to achieve all of the goals of the Act:

- (1) provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide;
- (2) lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards, adopted as rules by the State Board of Education at the direction of the General Assembly;
- (3) maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, with a goal of increasing the district-level ratio of students to full-time equivalent staff;
- (4) promote transparency and accountability; and
- (5) are delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.

In my view, unification of school districts under Act 46 will effectively address those goals.

We have started to collect feedback from school officials in districts that are unifying. Here is a representative sample of what is being reported:

Dave Connery

Chittenden South Supervisory Union Board Chairman

“We have an ability to share resources much more easily across the buildings, and I can't even imagine how that will benefit students even more as we roll this out.”

The supervisory union used to have instructional coaches that only worked with students at the high school. Now, the coaches are able to move around and work with faculty among all six schools.

“It’s a win-win for the staff, the students and the district as a whole. That’s just one example. I can imagine that working across individual school subjects, transportation, food service and things like that.”

Jeanné Collins

Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent

In Rutland Northeast, FRL applications now come through the central office. Because applications were evaluated the same way, instead of each school interpreting the application in its own way, the supervisory union was able to identify additional students who qualified for the benefit.

The Rutland Northeast system has three medium-sized elementary schools and three that are very small – Leicester, Sudbury and Whiting, none of which were big enough to have access to counseling support or literacy interventionists.

“We were able to create a position for a homeschool coordinator and a literacy interventionist, both of whom serve all three schools,” Collins said. This is the first time those three schools have had these services.

Right now, the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Board is spending a lot of time examining if all students have equitable opportunities.

“It’s very clear that our small schools do not,” Collins said.

For example, prior to the merger, Sudbury students had PE twice a week. In Whiting, students had PE once week. The schools are 2 miles apart and each have 35 kids. This year, they are sharing the PE teacher and all students now receive the same amount of PE.

Of the six elementary schools, only Neshobe has K-6 foreign language (Spanish). Barstow had to cut French. Lothrop had to cut French

“The board is discussing if this is important, and when you have 11 different boards, you didn’t ask those questions. You didn’t understand what was happening in your neighbor’s community,” Collins said.

John Alberghini

Mount Mansfield Modified Union School District Superintendent

“They’re more focused on students and families,” Alberghini said, regarding building principals. “These are the really hard jobs – getting kids college and career ready. They’re focused on what’s going on in the schools more than they were before.”

Alberghini said the change in duties might slow the statewide turnover of principals.

“There’s a certain attractiveness in being able to focus on what is going on in your school and not necessarily having to worry about the governance part of the job. That’s my responsibility,” he said.

Tammy Heffernan

Mill River Unified Union School Board Chairwoman

“We’re working on centralizing our curriculum among all of our elementary schools so that when the kids get to Mill River, they all come from the same background, from an educational perspective. At the high school level, it used to be that people could say, ‘Let me guess. You came from this school or you went to elementary school at that school,’ based on what they knew.”

Elaine Pinckney

Chittenden South Supervisory Union Superintendent

“Our committee, over and over again, almost at every meeting, someone would say, ‘Let’s just remind ourselves, we’re not doing this for the money. If it were about the money, we wouldn’t be at this table. We’re doing this because we believe there is a better way to organize ourselves that will immediately and continuously over time ensure the best system for our kids.’ They really believe these are all our kids. There is no conversation about, ‘Is this good for the kid in Hinesburg?’ or ‘Is this good for the kid in Charlotte?’”

Secretary Holcombe’s Presentation – January 2015

<http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2016/WorkGroups/Senate%20Education/Agency%20of%20Education/W~Rebecca%20Holcombe~The%20State%20of%20Vermont%20Public%20Education~1-9-2015.pdf>

Contact information for school officials who could offer future testimony

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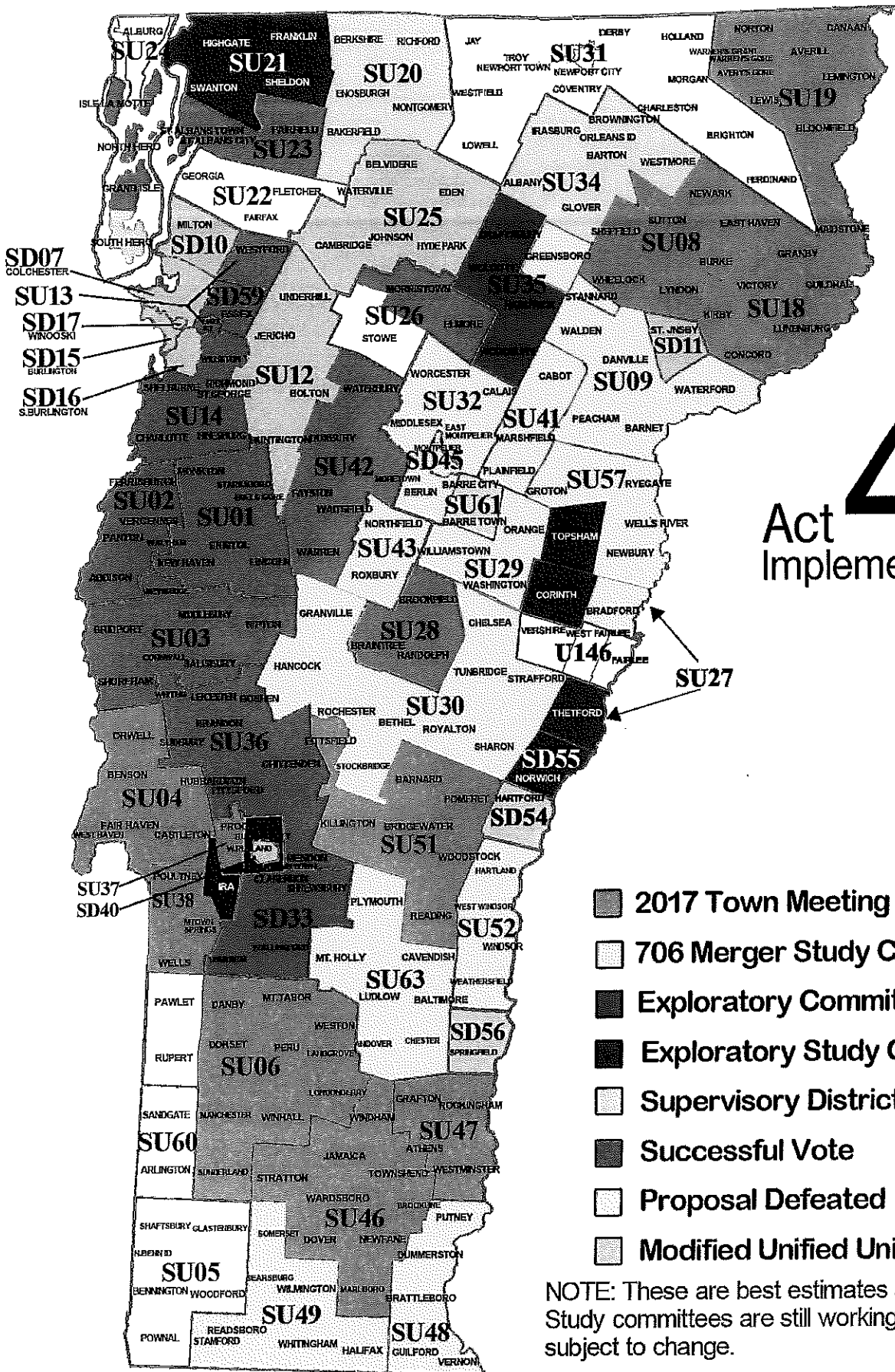
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Act 46

Implementation Project

VSA, VSBA, VSBIT

- 2017 Town Meeting Vote
- 706 Merger Study Committee
- Exploratory Committee
- Exploratory Study Complete
- Supervisory District
- Successful Vote
- Proposal Defeated
- Modified Unified Union SD

NOTE: These are best estimates as of 1/23/17
 Study committees are still working and dates are subject to change.