

Dear Legislators,

Thank you for your consideration of modifications to Act 46. While the “preferred model” of consolidation may make sense in some areas of the state, it doesn’t work in all areas, is unlikely to achieve the goals of the act and, most importantly, will harm the education of our children. Sadly, many of the supposed advantages of consolidation focus on convenience for central administration, simplification for the business office, or simply compliance with state mandates that are not necessarily in the interest of children or teachers.

Act 46 sets out two major goals—economic efficiency and equity. On both grounds, the current emphasis on one “preferred structure” fails to meet these goals, at least in some areas of the state.

I worry that the notion of local control gets misinterpreted as a question of governance rather than educational quality. The ultimate determinant of a student’s educational experience is the quality of teachers, the school principal, and programs at the local level. Student learning is not an abstraction of educational policy or governance—the most effective schools know students well and are responsive to the individual needs of kids and their families. The more bureaucratic and standardized our schools become, the less responsive they can be to the unique needs of the children they serve.

Local control really is about school based responsiveness to the needs of kids, the initiative of teachers, the input of the community, and the leadership of principals to shape an inspiring, dynamic, personalized learning environment that works for every child. Decisions made in the superintendent’s office or by a unified board can’t be based on knowing the uniqueness of our children or the unique needs of individual schools. Teachers will shy away from pursuing exciting new ideas that would have to be promulgated throughout a larger district. It’s hard enough to create something new at the classroom or school level; the idea of districtwide implementation of a teacher-initiated effort is nearly impossible. Parent voices will be subdued by having to go up the chain of command from principal to the superintendent.

Rather than increase opportunities in our school, they will be reduced by a merger for our district. One concern for many voters in Westminster would be the loss of middle school choice—figuring out how to have choice districts with non-choice district under an alternative governance structure would likely increase support for a merger. Even ignoring issues around choice, there are concerns about loss of valued programs. For example, we have a superb, school-run food program connected to our local farms and our school garden. This is likely one of the first programs that will be cut in a merged district to simplify management and to eliminate the inequity of one school’s superior food service. We have other offerings, such as an experiential learning program, not offered by other schools. Even if our surrounding schools tried to replicate these programs, they will not be comparable, since you cannot replicate the skills or enthusiasm of the staff who lead these unique programs. The quality of educational offerings is not only about program titles but depends on the personal commitment and energy of individual teachers or community volunteers. This is not something that can be easily replicated from site to site under the guise of equity.

Equity is not just about equal opportunities and offering the same experience for all—true equity means providing for the different needs of individual children to achieve the best outcomes for each. This kind of attention to individuals happens best at the individual school level. It is easy to claim allegiance to the principle of “educating all kids in Vermont” while ignoring the realities of what this means in practice. Standardizing our schools in an attempt to make them all “equal” will invariably result in less attention to the needs of individual students and an education system that may be more equal but of lower quality for all. As one good humored slogan states, “Homogenization: Good for milk, Not so good for kids.”

In terms of economic efficiency, it is ever more clear the savings of consolidation are minimal at best. In the budget making process, local boards scrutinize the budget line by line, even to the level of individual classroom expenditures. Often times, local taxpayers review the board’s budget with equal scrutiny. Merged district budgets will undergo much less scrutiny, if only because the numbers are bigger and the complexity greater. We have seen this absence of oversight for years at union high school budget meetings that sometimes draw single digit attendance. Town meetings have hundreds looking at the budget to keep costs contained--fewer people looking at a district wide budget will invariably lessen scrutiny and lead to higher levels of spending. The experience in Maine with consolidation has shown the increase in administrative costs from mergers. We don’t need more central office administration in Vermont. And the loss of involvement in town meeting undermines the long tradition of participatory democracy that is fundamental to our Vermont community identity.

We have already seen some of the problems with the consolidation of special education and bussing. We have lost some of our best teachers who have been moved to other schools. Cumbersome protocols from the central office make it harder to move personnel when an afterschool staff is sick or a new child needs services. There are no provisions for “unmerging” if the promised benefits don’t result. In Maine, many districts are trying to go back on consolidation mandated there. While the current superintendent and merger committee can make promises now about keeping local programs, not closing schools or not moving students, there is no saying what a future superintendent or board may decide. There is no knowing how individual communities will be impacted if their local school becomes part of a larger district—the merger is permanent, regardless of the impacts. There are stories already circulating about towns in Vermont who merged only last year and already are frustrated by the impact on staffing and tax rates.

There are likely ways to improve equity and opportunity and to realize fiscal savings with creative exploration among our local school districts. Our board was enthusiastic about serving on a study committee to explore this. We were sorely disappointed to find our local merger committee was limited to pursuing only a merger following the preferred structure and had a short timeline for follow-through. Extending deadlines and opening the process to alternatives will help achieve the goals of act 46 while allowing flexibility to the circumstances in different regions of the state. I hope our policy makers can keep attention on how best to provide for the well-being of our children and not on any single structure that may not work in different parts of the state.

While my formal remarks about the need for more flexible alternatives for inter-district cooperation did end there, I want to address what appears to be the new arguments against allowing the alternative structures envisioned originally in Act 46. We hear that since some districts have merged already under the preferred structure, it would be unfair to allow other districts to create an alternative structure. I cannot understand how already merged districts are disadvantaged by extended deadlines. First of all, they are the ones receiving the tax incentives (that all us other taxpayers are paying for). And any advantages they supposedly got from merging are there for them to enjoy (such as efficiencies and equity they expected). The preferred, accelerated consolidation seemed to work for these districts and their voters. These districts were the supposed "low hanging fruit" that fit into the preferred structure. But, I believe, everyone realized this singular structure wouldn't work in all areas of the state and Act 46 seemed to recognize this in proposing opportunities for alternative structures. Unfortunately, the rule making and implementation process got immersed in only the preferred model, maybe because that was all the AOE could engage with under such a short timeline.

I just don't see how the merged districts are harmed by extensions or creating some alternative that works for other regions. Extending the timeline can allow the AOE the space to support creative approaches that are much more likely to achieve positive results for all areas of the state. Allowing for alternative approaches is only "unfair" to already merged districts if there is a sense that the preferred structure is a burden to districts, schools and our children. If this latter is the case, then forcing all districts to bear this same burden is both mean spirited and unlikely to yield positive results.

I guess one analogy here is the gay marriage canard that somehow allowing marriage equality devalues heterosexual marriage. Assuming consolidation was and is seen as valuable, the districts that already merged should be happy with their decision and what happens for other districts should have no impact on their plans to move forward as a unified district.

I hope we can keep in mind how important it is for kids to be in a school system that can be responsive and flexible in the dynamic world in which we live. More bureaucracy, standardization, and centralized decision making may not be the best way to achieve this in all areas of the state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
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