

Public Comment for VT House Education Committee Public Meeting:
April 4, 2017 – Bruce B. Sterling

Hello, I am Bruce Sterling of Westminster. Thank you for considering my comments.

I am neither a school board member nor an educator; I am simply a parent concerned about my 2 kids' education and the quality of their schools. If I were not here tonight I would be sitting in on our local school board meeting in session also this evening. But I felt this meeting was just as important.

A few weeks ago I made a public comment at a meeting of the Board of Education on the need for clarity in the rules governing Alternative Governance Structures with, hopefully a more flexible transparent process to achieve an acceptable Alternative Structure for our town. After public comments we were told by both the new chair of the board and the Secretary of Education that their hands were pretty much tied on developing Act 46 compliance rules, that they are bound by the wishes of the legislature. If we wanted changes made we should go to Montpelier and talk with our legislators. I am not sure I completely concur on how powerless the State Board of Ed. is, be that as it may, here I am.

On Town Meeting day, three of four towns in our SU, by wide margins, voted down the Articles of the preferred school merger plan, only the larger town of Rockingham voted for it, by a slimmer margin. In total between the 4 towns the vote was 2 to 1 against merger. I cannot speak for all the towns but I feel in Westminster the voters rejected the merger because 1) they did not want to give up school choice a very popular program in our town. 2) people felt they were being asked to give up too much local control of our schools without getting very much in return. We in this town believe a healthy thriving school is achieved through strong local support. Finally, there was concern that we would lose too much of our local participatory democracy. We have a very strong sense of Community in Westminster highlighted by our Town Meeting.

Tonight the Westminster school board is meeting with a special session devoted to the process of organizing ourselves and our neighboring towns, both far and wide, to develop a plan to meet with the goals of the Act 46 law. Make no mistake, our town intends to comply with the law and will be looking to promote equity in education, to maximize operational efficiencies, promote transparency while also minimizing costs. These are all goals our school board and the SU have been working towards all along. Tonight, my friends and neighbors on the board and those willing to help are taking on an extra burden in our already busy lives – a burden which no one asked for, the burden to work toward developing an Alternative Governance Structure under Act 46.

We know that, as part of the law, Alternate Structures will have to be accepted by the State Board. But no one knows what criteria are acceptable for a viable Alternative Structure. I feel what we need is for the legislature to require of the Board of Education to develop a clear and workable process towards compliance, submission and acceptance of an Alternative Structure Proposal. To that end, I am asking you to set clear definitions within the law for the State Board of Ed. to follow. In so doing, this will insure that the board does not undermine the intent of the legislature by making the road to Alternative Structure overly burdensome. I ask you further to

Comment [CC1]: I don't think we want to imply that we have not been working on this all along.

Comment [CC2]: Good. It is not as if we have been ignoring any of this.

require the board to develop a process which is flexible, allowing Vermont towns multiple routes to compliance because not all towns are the same. The legislature should make it clear to the State Board that the review procedure for acceptance of an Alternative Structure proposal is also clear, open and transparent. Finally, there needs to be a clear standard in place for appeals if any proposal is rejected. One of the best ways to achieve these goals for us would be to consider legislation more like H-15 rather than S-122 as proposed.

Thank you again for your time and service.
Bruce Sterling, Westminster