

4/4/17 Testimony, House Education Committee hearing on S.122
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S.122 recognizes the need for flexibility in unifying structures due to specific circumstances that make unification challenging: geographic or structural isolation, and the financial-political challenge of trying to accommodate uneven indebtedness. But the strategy for this Bill addresses these select few challenging scenarios, while failing to recognize other challenges that are *just as real* to districts that have taken the same steps to attempt unification, and have failed.

In the case of my town of Barnard, the challenge is an intractable political one: a larger town with more representation on the Study Committee pushed through a Plan that involved re-structuring the two smallest elementary schools, including Barnard's, in order to fund programmatic improvements elsewhere. This Plan brought little to the table for Barnard and arguably degraded the educational experience for Barnard students, who would have to make an extra, awkward transition between schools in 5th grade, and then another two years later. Even more distressing, the sustainability of the Barnard school is compromised by this re-structuring, and *quite unjustifiably so*: through responsible and responsive local governance, we have maintained student enrollment numbers for over ten years, have the second highest staff:student ratio in our SU, and the second lowest per pupil spending. Our school has been a model for successful small school governance in the State. Barnard citizens voted to reject the Study Committee's merger proposal, as voters wielded the only real power they had within this proposal process.

But now we're left in a vulnerable position. While districts with debt (and their SUs) are given specific protections under S.122 to usher

forward more mergers, our academically strong and fiscally responsible school district is left uncertain about the State's sanctioning of an Alternative Structure that supports and protects our students while promoting the goals of Act 46. We need more flexibility in demonstrating the efficacy and adequacy of our alternative proposal in the context of the process that brought us here. S.15 does much better here, for example by instructing the Board of Education to evaluate an Alternative Structure proposal on the basis of a demonstration *that it is better suited to the member districts* than an Education District, and will meet the goals of the Act. In this way, the Board is not attempting to push districts down narrow pathways of compliance, but rather allowing the unique characteristics of a region to inform an analysis of how best to achieve the goals of the Act. I urge the Committee to put S.15 on the table for discussion.

The Baruth amendment to S.122 includes a revision in Section 9 of the Act, to include a requirement for remaining district proposals to describe its consideration of mergers and other models of joint activity. I am happy to see that the State requests this information. However, this must not be seen simply as evidence of our good faith efforts to work with our neighbors towards the goals of the Act. Rather, this information *provides the context for and informs the landscape of the real structural options before our district now*, and so needs to factor into the State's assessment of the three other proposal requirements listed before it. Our voters deserve an explicit acknowledgment that our proposal will be judged not against an abstract idea of a preferred model, but rather against the real options politically available. We need more explicit support of *all* districts continually working towards Act 46 goals – not just those particular few acknowledged in S.122 -- in order to make choices not out of fear, but rather out of informed consideration of how our district can best meet the Act's goals.