

Testimony to House Education Committee on S.122

Erik Goodling, Chair, Strafford School Board

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Being elected to a school board in a small town brings with it two seemingly contradictory responsibilities: To provide for the best education of the students under your aegis and to keep tax rates affordable for residents. The goals of Act 46 seem to address both sides of this weighty coin. However, when looking more closely, the focus on mergers, governance change, and consolidation appears to lean much more heavily on the latter at the expense of the former. S.122 does little to rectify this and does not help local boards struggling to meet the goals of the law.

All of the so called “carrots” of Act 46, the tax incentives and grants, are tied to the re-organization of districts and school boards. None of them are tied to actual, realized educational outcomes or documented savings but solely to the formation of consolidated unions and districts. With this as a backdrop, many towns have scrambled to find their place in a merger in order to reap these rewards. However, despite hours and hours of districts’ efforts to find a structure that can meet their needs, the options offered by Act 46 often do not work in many areas of the state. Furthermore, by not acquiescing to an unacceptable option, the towns that find themselves in this situation face financial penalties and, ultimately, potentially being forced into a structure against the will of their voters.

In my town of Strafford, we are the only district in the state with our combination of operating and tuition structure: operating K-8 with a designated high school - Thetford Academy. It is literally impossible for us to merge with another town under Act 46 without making one of the changes specifically protected in the Act. However, surrounding Strafford are several other towns - currently in two SU’s - each with similar but different structures. Under Act 46, even with the proposed changes in S.122, there is simply no merger option that allows these towns to come together, focus on further improving the education they give to all of their students, develop innovative and

creative ways to share resources, increase educational opportunities, and, yes, share and reduce costs. For this reason, and for all the other towns that find themselves in equally difficult situations, it is critical that Alternative Governance Structures be more clearly defined as an acceptable or even preferred avenue to pursue in order to comply with Act 46.

Instead of allowing for this kind of innovative, creative solution for meeting the goals of the Act, S.122 seeks to offer slightly modified boxes to fit districts into. While this will allow some districts to meet the letter of the law and be exempt from the final State Plan, it does nothing to help towns pursue truly substantive alternatives that bring about real progress toward the goals of the Act. Rather than pursue this strategy as laid out in S.122, I urge the committee to give Alternative Governance Structures equal footing to mergers as in H.15 and S.15, in order that local boards and communities can work together to find innovative solutions that allow them to fully meet all the goals of Act 46 while still doing what's best for their students.