

## Testimony for the 4/4/17 House Education Committee Hearing on S. 122

Jessica Seman, Reading

There is no doubt that Reading is a small town with a small school. I am a native Vermonter, and I graduated from a small Vermont school. I came back to Vermont to attend law school and decided to stay because my husband and I wanted to raise our family here. We specifically chose Reading because of its close-knit community and excellent elementary school. We easily could have chosen to live elsewhere in Vermont or New Hampshire. However, we saw VALUE in educating our children in a small, local school.

Reading voted against a merger proposed by the 706b study committee formed by our SU. The plan was demonstrably unfair to our town: it proposed to cut staffing at our elementary school that would eliminate our 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and bus them to Woodstock. As one of our board members put it: our students were offered as “sacrificial lambs” to ensure continuation of the schools in our larger, neighboring towns that suffer from rapid population decline and inflated budgets. Furthermore, the composition of the merged board was based on proportionality, and gave significant representation to our larger neighbors. The structure of the merged board serves to decrease transparency and accountability in formulating education decisions, contrary to the goals of the law. I could continue on and on about the inadequacies of the merger plan and the process by which it was formulated but, suffice it to say: nothing about the proposed merger was “equitable.”

Now, our town is struggling to figure out how to comply with the requirements of Act 46, but also do what is in the best interest of our children and our tax payers. We want to put together an alternative structure that treats our town fairly in the act of merging with towns like our own, but S. 122 doesn't go far enough.

For starters, we need more time to craft a plan. We need legislation that will give us ample time to explore our options and vet them with our community. As of today, the AOE hasn't finalized the rules for alternate structures...how can we devise a plan that comports with the law by November without any guidance on how to do so? We need more time, direction and guidance.

Secondly, we need more flexibility. For instance: one of the options our board is exploring involves partnering with towns that are geographically and culturally similar to Reading, but belong to a different Supervisory Union. S.122 seems to permit this, but as I understand it this provision was drafted with a particular town in mind. This provision should be made available to all towns seeking to explore alternative structures. We should be allowed to leave an SU that is no longer serving the needs of our students and—in my view—doesn't really view us as a meaningful partner in a district-wide plan to improve educational outcomes.

S. 122 provides only narrow paths to compliance with Act 46 for a handful of districts and towns that would form successful mergers but for the fact that they are not considering preferred governance structures. This leaves a significant number of towns—like Reading—without guidance or even avenues to explore. This cannot be the goal of the legislature.

In the ten years I have lived in Reading, the voters have approved our school budget every year but once...and in that one year, it passed on the second vote with minimal revisions. The message of the voters is clear: our school is the heart of our community, it is essential to the vitality of our town, and we want to be able to meaningfully participate in educational decisions about our children.