

S.122 - An act relating to increased flexibility for school district mergers

April 4, 2017

House Committee on Education

Judy Murray
Blue Mountain Union School District Board of Directors
Act 46 706b Study Committee Member

Dear Committee Members,

I am Judy Murray from Wells River in the Northeast Kingdom. I represent and speak on behalf of the Blue Mountain Union (BMU) School Board and BMU's Act 46 Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts regarding Act 46 and my sincere hope that you will consider Alternative Governance Structures to help communities like BMU meet the goals of Act 46.

I moved to Wells River from Thetford so that our daughter could attend BMU. I became a School Board Member to help build bridges between our small community school and the three communities, which have already merged once, during a very difficult time of budget deficits and staff cutbacks. I have watched this small community school rebuild those bridges, increase educational opportunities for the students, turn their finances around to produce a budget surplus three years in a row and we are on track to be debt free in 2019. I have watched my daughter thrive in the school's culture and grow academically and athletically thanks to dedicated teachers and volunteer coaches. Now I am also a member of our Act 46 Study Committee and come before you today to voice our concerns, and the concerns of citizens in my community, about Act 46 and its impact on our students and community.

Under Act 46, as currently enforced by the AOE and State Board of Education, BMU and all of the excellent programs and school environment that it provides our students and communities are in peril. Unlike other districts, BMU's population is stable and/or growing yearly. BMU provides educational opportunities for our students at all grade levels; some that are models for other communities and that the AOE commended in their pilot of the Education Quality Review – Integrated Field Review rolled out in the spring of 2016. We continue to see increases in standardized test scores and other measures of student growth and achievement.

The charge of the Act 46 Study Committee is to find ways to consolidate governance and share resources to improve the educational opportunities for our students and to find cost savings for our taxpayers. These are laudable goals and ones that BMU has worked diligently to implement. BMU has been in talks for over 18 months with our 706b Study Committee and can find neither discernible increases in educational opportunities or cost savings for our taxpayers without closing a school or excessive restructuring of schools resulting in unacceptable transportation times (over an hour each way for students in Groton) and increased transportation costs overall. These talks have also

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led to divisions within our communities and reopened old wounds from our initial merger in the 1970's.

The path that has been set before us by the state is not tenable and the goals of Act 46 cannot be met without further consideration of Alternative Governance Structures. When looking at the current landscape, the proposed changes under S.122, may not offer us a way forward either. School districts should be given the autonomy under the law to achieve its goals in the best way possible for them; one size does not fit all. I cannot stand before the voters of my community, who have come to trust me, and advocate for merger as currently outlined in Act 46 or S.122.

I work for a biotech headquartered in Wilmington, MA and could live anywhere in NE. We decided to move to Wells River so that our daughter could attend BMU because of everything that it has to offer. Is it a big school with many resources? No, but it has opportunities for any student that wants to take advantage of them. It has a close-knit student body that has a good rapport with the staff. It has teachers that care. It has an Administration that is committed to providing the best education possible while maintaining fiscal restraint. *The very things that make BMU my school of choice could be lost not because we cannot comply with the goals of Act 46, but because we do not fit into the square hole of a preferred structure.* Please craft your legislation to help rural schools like BMU comply with Act 46 while also supporting our students and taxpayers. Rural school districts, particularly in the Northeast Kingdom have many challenges in complying with Act 46. Alternative Governance Structures need to be considered on par with preferred structures with clear rules surrounding how they can be implemented. Please help us achieve the best results for our kids in the long run through flexibility, creative problem solving and building of strong community ties that support student achievement.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Judy Murray
Wells River, VT