

April 4, 2017

Dear Education Committee Members,

Thank you for your hard work on an issue Vermonters care about deeply, and taking the time to hear from those of us who have been working hard to try and implement the goals of Act 46. Our highly performing Supervisory Union has spent many hours struggling with the constructs of Act 46 as we all hope to achieve the goals. I believe the legislature intended to give districts flexibility with the constructs and am writing to urge that S.122 includes more flexibility with governance options.

Many years ago, my elementary math teachers expected us to solve math problems only in the way the teacher prescribed. If I solved a problem differently, even if I arrived at the same answer, my solution would be 100% wrong. Happily, for my children, alternative math solutions are allowed, and even encouraged. As a former educator and current Schoolboard member, I am proud of the advances we continue to make have made to embrace differences in student's learning and encourage thinking 'outside the box'.

Forty years later, Act 46 implementation seems to have the same challenges as education methods in the 1970's. We can all agree that the correct answers for Vermont are the goals of Act 46; equity, efficiency, quality, transparency and accountability. However, just as in 1970's math classes, the implementation of Act 46 had made it almost impossible for districts to consider other methods for reaching the correct answer. Districts considering alternative structures do not have clear guidelines and criteria for understanding what flexibility they have in achieving the goals. In fact, merging districts are rewarded with tax incentives for simply merging without knowing if the district met any of the goals. Therefore, a merging district that does not achieve any goals receives tax incentives, while a non-merging district who achieve the goals may face being merged by the state against their will.

Our district is often told, "We must merge or the state will do it for us". I do not believe that was the intent of Act 46, Section 9. Furthermore, the "bigger is better" notion does not reflect the values and realities of Vermont. Vermont small companies and farms have found ways to be successful against Big Agri-businesses by applying hard work and creative thinking to the challenges of being small. I would not ask Grafton Cheese to make cheese like Kraft Foods nor ask the legislature to merge Vermont with the state of New York State to achieve their "efficiencies".

Allowing Vermonters flexibility to meet challenges may yield better results than one size fits all prescriptions. I strongly urge the committee to clarify the process for districts eager to comply with Act 46 via Alternative Governance Structures, to underscore the flexibility intended by the legislature, and to hold all districts, merged or not, accountable to meeting the goals of Act 46. With these changes, towns can find the most logical pathway for their students and taxpayers to achieve the goals of Act 46.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kristina Naylor

Dummerston, Vermont

