

4/4/17 Testimony, House Education Committee Public Hearing on S.122; Rachel Navaro, Reading

On March 7th, 2017, the town of Reading voted against (135 to 64) a shoddy Act 46 plan, which ultimately passed for four other districts.

To cut costs, the “single bottom line” plan recommended eliminating Reading’s grades 5 and 6 (originally grades 3 through 6) and busing those students to Woodstock—a commute that, for some students, would have amounted to two hours a day on a school bus... in good weather... not including wait times or delays.

Research clearly demonstrates that busing elementary-age students more than 30 minutes one way could be considered “exploitation of their time,” and that “students with large average times on buses report lower grades, poorer levels of fitness, fewer social activities, and poor study habits.” The study committee that developed our so-called preferred plan not only failed to investigate the duration of the proposed school bus rides for our town’s (8, 9,) 10 and 11-year olds; it failed to even *consider* the potential inequity and deleterious effects of long school bus rides on our town’s young schoolchildren.

This is but one example of why the “preferred” plan was not at all preferable, fair, or equitable for Reading’s students, particularly its leadership grades—the same grades that put Reading Elementary School on the map as one of *only sixty-four districts in the entire nation* to have received the First Annual U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Award, honoring our school’s “exemplary efforts to reduce environmental impact and utility costs, promote better health, and ensure effective environmental education, including civics and green career pathways.” The U.S. Secretary of Education at the time said schools like Reading “are modeling a comprehensive approach to being green... are demonstrating ways schools can simultaneously cut costs; improve health, performance and equity; and provide an education geared toward the jobs of the future... (and) are saving millions of dollars as a result of their greening efforts.”

Reading may not have the lowest per pupil spending in the state. But relative to other Vermont schools of its size, makeup, and budgetary constraints, it’s average. And if a United States Secretary of Education says that schools such as ours are “saving millions of dollars as a result of our greening efforts,” does this not count for something?

As it stands, I fail to see how the narrow pathways towards consolidation in S.122 would even allow for—much less facilitate—an *equitable* school governance merger for Reading Elementary School. We must have greater flexibility, more time, better guidance, and *equal* opportunity to explore options beyond the limited and unjust ones put forth by our former study committee.

I trust that you, our legislators, will do what you can to incorporate into S.122 more of what H.15 was slated to provide: an opportunity for school districts such as ours to work in genuine partnership with the state towards the goals of the law. We must be able to make our cases for carefully considered collaboration directly to the State Board of Education. And we must be judged against the same standards set for preferred mergers. Such legislative support would enable our town to legitimately work towards the laudable goals of Act 46: equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities; leading our students to achieve or exceed the state’s education quality standards; operational efficiencies with the goal of increasing our student-to-staff ratio; promoting transparency and accountability; and delivering all of this at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.

Thank you for your consideration on this vital matter.