

Testimony for 4/4/17 House Education Committee hearing S.122
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Act 46 has my town fearful and S. 122 does nothing to quell those fears. We voted to reject a merger, not out of some abject refusal, but because the plan we voted on was unjust. The plan, which was dominated by a larger neighboring town and their allies, proposed staffing cuts at our school despite the fact our school has the 2nd *highest* student to staff ratios and our town has the 2nd *lowest* per pupil spending in the SU. The plan called for eliminating our 5th and 6th grade classes, busing them to other schools while other students were protected from this burden. Essentially, our school was to be cannibalized to protect the bloated budget and rapidly declining enrollment of our neighbors. Is this the sort of “equity” the law was intended to achieve? Is our high quality and efficient school supposed to be sacrificed for mere *compliance*? There has to be a better way forward.

Our greatest fear is that the state intends to overturn our election, to nullify it. We need the state to send a clear signal that our alternative structure proposal will be judged fairly - and it must be judged based on the *actual* merger proposal before us, the one we voted against, not the *abstract idea* of merging. This is a crucial distinction.

We need time to craft a plan that will honor the goals of the law. The current deadlines are an impediment to making smart decisions about the future of our school. Our previous school board (now replaced) went all in on the failed merger plan and wasted 18 months of research and planning time. At this late hour in the process, the rules for alternative structures have not even been finalized by the AOE - how can we be expected to make an informed proposal without that guidance? The proposed extended deadlines in H. 15 would provide remedy for towns like ours that have faithfully followed the law.

I recently heard alternative structures referred to as a “last resort.” If crippling, and eventually closing, a successful smaller school to prop up a larger, more expensive one isn’t a last resort, what is? I would hope the true last resort would be for the state to overturn an election or to continue to scare the citizens of my town, rather than reaching out to support us in our responsibility to help improve the education of students in Vermont. In that regard, H. 15 would give Barnard the help it needs to comply with Act 46, whereas S. 122 leaves us twisting in the wind.

