

Testimony on S15 before the Senate Education Committee. 1-26-17

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee - Thank you for considering the subject of Alternative Governance under Act 46, and thank you for considering my testimony. My name is David Major and I am chair of the Westminster School Board. I was also a member of the Windham Northeast Act 46 consolidation study committee until I resigned in frustration. My frustration arose over the apparent barriers our study committee felt there were to the consideration or even the discussion of alternative governance. The committee understood that the rules constrained its activity to a yes or no decision about a "preferred" full merger and to work out the details of a merger agreement. I felt then as I do now that an alternative school governance model could accomplish the goals of Act 46 better than the so called preferred model, without taking away the advantages of our current system. My reasons follow.

Before I get into those reasons I first would like to say a word about what I mean personally when I refer to "alternative governance." When I refer to alternative governance I refer to any variety of school governance systems where towns keep their school districts and school boards. A number of possibilities have been discussed around the state, but the one that I like the most so far is being developed by folks around East Montpelier, Berlin, Calais, Worcester, and Rumney. This is a federated model where town school boards run the town elementary schools, but members of the town boards work together in a federated district board that controls the union high school and supervisory union activities. The federated district board presents the high school and supervisory union budgets before the voters every town meeting time, as do the individual town school boards. I urge you to take a closer look at the federated model and the work of these folks.

One of the most important goals of Act 46 is to create greater equity in educational opportunities for our students. The law, however, does not define equity. Like a number of others, the consolidation committee in Windham Northeast defined equity primarily as an equality in the number of minutes devoted weekly to each subject. An example: second graders in Grafton receive 40 minutes of vocal music per week while second graders in Bellows Falls receive 68 minutes: equity, then, is achieved when both classes receive the same number of minutes of vocal music (and other subjects) per week. The Windham Northeast consolidation agreement to be voted on March 7 is devised to achieve "equity" (in quotes) in this fashion. My own educational experience leads me to believe that equity may be achieved in other more meaningful ways. I attended the local schools, then went on to Bellows Falls Union High School and Harvard University. The strength of my high school and college education came as much from a diversity in mine and my peers educational experiences as it did from any kind of equality. Thus I think that a true equity in opportunity may result from empowering the diversity that we have in our citizens and towns across the state. I believe that an alternative governance model can do a better job supporting towns to continue developing their own unique schools while making it easier for towns to share successful educational and extra curricular programs with each other. The preferred merger model seems likely to equalize the education programs and stifle the diversity and creativity that comes out of our communities. I am not sure we Vermonters want that kind of "equity."

Another important goal of Act 46 is efficiency: that consolidation will bring about lower costs. The evidence for this seems pretty sketchy, both in Vermont so far and in other states that have gone through consolidation. It is clear, however, that in many cases the financial implications of a "preferred" merger are unfair and create a Robin-Hood-in-reverse scenario. In the case of Windham Northeast the school property tax rate of Athens, for instance, will rise 25% over the next few years of a merged existence, as the citizens of Athens assume the bond obligations of

the two much larger and somewhat wealthier towns to its east. Athens property tax payers will help pay off those other town school bonds until the 2030's, resulting in a considerable transfer of wealth from poorer to relatively wealthier areas. An alternative governance system could better attain the efficiencies of cooperation without the financial inequities created by combining districts with unequal debt burdens.

Our consultant for the Windham Northeast 706 study committee began his discussion of the Act 46 goal of increased accountability and transparency by asking, "how could anyone argue against that?" Well - it depends on whether you are referring to accountability and transparency from the top down or the bottom up. From the center of power perspective, the fewer consolidated school budgets the more accountable and transparent, but from the citizen's point of view, the more local the budget the more comprehensible it is likely to be, and the more power he or she has over it. A Grafton resident could feel that a consolidated school system is less accountable and transparent to him, when he can vote for his representative to the unified board only once every three years, and his annual vote on the budget of a whole handful of schools is pooled with voters of other towns who have never entered his children's school, nor he theirs. I suspect the resident may feel disempowered in such a system, and the feeling of disempowerment is a big problem in our country right now. An alternative governance model could continue to give the citizen a chance to deliberate on a meaningful local school budget while also giving the citizen a direct vote over the high school and supervisory union budgets.

Now I hope to take a minute to point out advantages of our current system of school governance that an alternative school governance system could retain.

School-community connection. In Westminster we have a community driven Winter sports program, a very strong school summer camp and after-school program, and a unique, local, high quality school meals program. These are specific examples of locally driven school programs that result from an empowered, involved community.

School choice. In Westminster, Athens, and Grafton, we have school choice for 7th and 8th graders. For our geographically diverse communities, this is an important option. An alternative governance system could allow towns to retain school choice yet work with towns that do not.

Finally: town meeting. This is a subject that has not received anywhere near the attention that it deserves. The town meeting is a foundation of our state's democracy. It acts as a source of community empowerment, creative problem solving, and a source of stability as the whims of our state and federal administrations change. The health of our town meeting has a great deal to do with the health of our communities and our schools. Furthermore, the school portion of the town meeting is the most important element of the meeting for most towns on most years: the kids are the future of our communities. Frankly, the legislature and the governor should be doing much more to strengthen the town meeting process. Consolidation drastically weakens that portion of our democracy; alternative governance systems could strengthen it. It takes a village to raise a child, so let us put a little care into our villages.

In summary, the alternative governance option is an important one in Act 46. In order to make it realistic for communities to explore, I encourage the senate to:

Extend the deadlines of Act 46;

Make the district size minimums more flexible;

Require the Board of Education to review the alternative governance proposals as they are presented;

Keep the small schools grants for qualifying schools in an alternative governance system;

State explicitly that school choice is an option for any towns that so choose in an alternative governance system;

Make the requirements for submitting an alternative governance proposal no more onerous than those required for submitting a preferred merger agreement; and provide funding and tax incentives on par with those provided for full, "preferred" mergers.

I feel compelled to make one further point. The VSBA or "Vermont School Board Association," no longer accepts school boards as members. School boards no longer pay dues; school boards no longer have a vote. Since a change to the bylaws enacted by the VSBA at their annual meeting on October 20, 2016 only Supervisory Unions or Supervisory Districts pay dues and vote. Of course the organization is made up of capable, well-meaning folks - my mother was vice-chair some years ago! Structurally, the VSBA is now an organization made up of and representing supervisory unions; it is no longer structured to represent or make recommendations on behalf of Vermont School Boards. This may explain why the testimony you hear from the VSBA on alternative governance is so diametrically opposed to the testimony of school board members such as myself.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

David Major