

January 25, 2019
Testimony of Jill Stahl Tyler
On Delaying Act 46 Implementation

I understand that there is consideration to delay the final steps of Act 46, which is the final implementation of a law that was passed in June of 2015. That's coming up on four years... that's FOUR YEARS of talking and looking at the issues down here in our region.

The legislature should commend yourselves for looking at a very pressing issue—the costs of education and the inherent inequities in our current systems—and making a change. And when presented with unique situations, like the town of Vernon with school choice, you have created another round of laws to not unreasonably single out one entity. This is hard work that you took on—congratulations for making the hard choices in 2015 to address an issue that people have been talking about for the last decade!

True to the Vermont ideals of civic engagement, you then tasked those of us most directly involved in the governance of our schools to take on the next level of complexity: looking at how to make it work best for our communities. There have been no easy answers, no fast way out.

But during that time, in my capacity as chair of the Brattleboro Town School Boards, I have come to fully believe that the benefits of the merger serve both the children and the taxpayers. Our board has spent countless hours and energy on this issue. The majority of the school board members in this region agree that a merger is the best option for us to address the real and pressing concerns you rightly identified at the state level.

Those who do not agree have been a vocal minority. They have been very smart in their approach, and they have utilized fear and untruths to sway voters. Tell folks that “merger equals school closure” and you have immediate and understandable panic.

Two weeks ago, I spent one hour getting signatures for my petition to stay on the Brattleboro Town School Board, supposedly through July 1st, as the merger is to go through. Most of the people I spoke with were teachers. Only those teachers who have most been involved with board interactions understood that there was more than one board, currently, for the town of Brattleboro. Truly, for the most part, people do not understand school governance now.

Further, the vast majority of schools in the state of Vermont have complied with Act 46. They (like I) understood the law to say that you either come up with a merger that works for your community... or the state will merge you.

We are now at that point of the final mergers and yes, forced compliance with the law. This is not a surprise to anyone who was on the study committees: it's the way the law was written and passed.

I will note that this is no different than other laws that we, as citizens, must comply with. For example, I don't think that it makes much sense that I have to take off my shoes and go through a lengthy security process every time I board a plane. But I don't get to say that I don't like it, or not comply. It's the law, and it was put in place in the attempt to get us all to our destinations safely.

It is completely unfair to stop or delay the process now. At this point, we have already prepared our budgets, looking at a merged entity. We need to put them before the voters, and have time to explain them.

Any more delays at this point mean making it terribly hard—or impossible—to get a thoughtful budget pulled together by a transitional and merged board... in making sure that the public understands the budget it will be voting on... in being fair to those who have worked so hard to comply with a law....and respecting those who have already merged, as the law required be done.

It is particularly important to the town of Guilford, one of the towns in the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. This is the town that has the most to lose if implementation is delayed.

If there is not a merger, Guilford will have an increase of \$92,000 in their costs for 7th and 8th graders, according to our business manager. \$92,000 on a \$3 million budget is, of course, very impactful. It pushes them way over the cap. It will mean that severe and significant cuts will have to be made. The board would have to cut staff and programs, such as their after-school offerings and sports.

If the merger is completed by July of this year, then Guilford would be able to keep their small school with its same staff, the tax rate flat and provide the same educational opportunities that they have been offering. For Guilford, it's very easy to see that the merger is good for students and tax payers.

I am happy to talk more about this. I have not spent my time fighting the law during the past four years—although I have had my times of reservation and concerns. Instead, as the law said that we must merge—or else be merged—I have dedicated my hours to looking at how to best come together to meet the very laudable goals of the law.

Do not delay this process any further. Four years ago, you passed this law for a reason. The student decline has not stopped. The rising costs of education have not suddenly shifted. Hundreds of schools have spent thousands of collective hours looking at how to be more efficient, how to share, and how to be equitable.

Let the law stay as it is and let the process you started do what you intended it to do.

Jill Stahl Tyler
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