

Dear Chair Webb and Members of the House Education Committee:

I just saw that you are taking testimony at 10:30 this morning from Jill Stahl-Tyler and I have read her prepared testimony. First of all, I was under the impression that you would not be taking any testimony as there is litigation taking place and we would not be allowed to testify if we were participants in the court case. May I point out, that the State is also a party.

In reading Ms Tyler's testimony, I would like to point out a few issues.

1 - She has been very vocal about wanting to send Vernon, a town that was one of the original member of our Supervisory Union, to another SU. An SU that has a very different curriculum than ours. Over 80% of Vernon's students attend our 7-12 Middle and High School as they have choice. This would put their students at a huge disadvantage. Plus it would be very costly to our SU not having them with us.

2 - She states that the majority of our school board members agree that merger is the best option. I believe this is a false statement in my count of where these members stand and voted as the boards except for Dummerston were split.

3 - Ms. Tyler says that those who do not agree with merger are a vocal majority. She is way off base on this comment as all of our area towns voted overwhelmingly not to merge. The combined vote was over 2:1. Every town voted no. Dummerston voted 5:1.

4 - I am glad she calls the people against merger smart. The voters were very well educated over the past years by both sides of the issue. According to all of the Town Clerks the voter turn out was very large, especially for a one issue vote.

5 - She says people are afraid of school closure. Yes they are and this is not just a fear as schools have already closed. A super board does not have to do the closing but by moving students out of a school which they will be able to do, makes a school unsustainable and therefore needing to close. A very sneaky way to do it, but it happens.

Our neighboring SU is already headed that way and they haven't even officially merged.

6 - Ms Tyler talks about getting signatures on her petition. It is important to note that these signatures are all from Brattleboro that has three schools. Moving teachers from one of those to another is not the same big deal as it would be moving teachers from one of the outlying towns to Brattleboro or another outlying school.

7 - I totally agree with Ms Tyler when she states a couple of times that school districts merged because they were told over and over by the BOE, AOE and administrators that "if we don't agree to merger, the state will merge you". This threat made several areas merge when they really didn't want to to gain the incentives (Bribes?). Some of these areas are already having buyers remorse.

8 - And yes, this is state forced compliance.

9 - She compares this to what we have to do to board a plane. Boarding a plane is very different as that is for our safety. Merging has nothing to do with safety.

10 - To say this is unfair to those who have merged is totally unfair. They made their own decision. They got the money and Small Schools Grants forever. The others formed Alternative Governance plans which are part of the law, not outside it. Gave up receiving any incentives in favor of their AGS.

11 - As to Guilford, they made the decision to send their 7 & 8th grades to Brattleboro Middle School. They were promised a sweetheart financial deal for several years, much cheaper than the rest of us were paying. I am not even sure this was ever legal. By sending their middle schoolers to BAMS they made their school too small to be sustainable. Now they are looking to merge to save their school. They have excellent programs, PreK etc. This is more than some of the others have but were able to do it because of their arrangement with BAMS when the rest of the outlying towns were paying more out of their budgets.

12 - She says that the merged budgets are completed, not the individual board budgets. This is not correct. The boards are being told by our Superintendent by the AOE that this is the path we have to take. However, the AOE is not law. In fact if you read the title 16 of the Education law you will see that it says that boards need to prepare their budgets and present them at Town Meeting. Dummerston has prepared their budget and warned it for town meeting as have the members of the Windham Northeast SU and many others. We were almost finished with our budget before this decree came down from the AOE. We have not been part of any merged budget. I do believe that all of our towns had been preparing their own budgets.

There is a lot more I could tell you about our 706b study committee process and would if we were also asked to testify. I attended all but two meetings from the very beginning before everyone joined the study committee. We were never told exactly what the process would be. Our board thought they would be "studying" what was the best option. They did not realize that they were actually preparing for merger. They did not know that once on the committee you were on for life and couldn't be replaced. Dummerston tried to replace their representative as she was not presenting what her board wanted. We were told we could not replace her and she was not supposed to represent her board. It was a very nasty and uncomfortable time. What kind of democratic committee is this?

I never heard anyone during the whole process say that the "Goals of Act 46" weren't admirable. In fact we all thought and do still think they are. We also think that it is the *Goals* that should be evaluated and not governance. In working on our Alternative Governance proposal (allowed by the law) it is the goals that we kept in the forefront in writing our proposal. These AGS proposals were never even really considered by the BOE. It was very obvious in either being at their meetings or watching the videos that some board members had not read the proposals. To be fair to the BOE, I strongly believe they were given an impossible task in very little time with no money.

In closing, although there is a lot more all of us can say, I sincerely hope you consider a one year delay. It is very necessary to completely hear all of the testimony and to give the courts the time to do their job. This delay would do no "harm" to anyone and might even be beneficial to all. To continue the process at this stage may do harm if towns go ahead and do something that would be horrendous to unravel.

Thank you for listing to another perspective.

Sincerely,

Jody Normandeau
Dummerston, Vermont