

April 13, 2020

Dear Vermont Legislators,

My name is David Schoales. I am chair of the Windham Southeast School District, which includes Dummerston, Guilford, Putney, and Brattleboro. I would like to speak to the questions of how districts with unapproved budgets might have them approved; and what changes the legislature might consider as alternatives to current statute regarding unapproved budgets.

First, I am advised that our Town Clerks have expressed resistance to the idea of a mail-in ballot. They are concerned the ballots could become contaminated and put the volunteers on the Board of Civil Authority at risk. I share their concern.

Regarding our budget, our school district includes three elementary schools where nearly 60% of the 700+ students come from less affluent families. Our other three elementary schools also have significant number of these students. As research clearly proves, these children do not have the same opportunities to succeed as their more affluent classmates, and come to school with greater challenges as learners.

For the past several years, new positions created in our district have reflected these truths. Our professional development has focused on how to support students who live with trauma. We have hired social workers to support our less-affluent families; counselors and behavior intervention specialists to support the increasing number of students with significant trauma in their life; and central office staff to help administer an increasingly complex health insurance system and ever-expanding data reporting requirements.

Our budget increase for FY21 represents additional health care costs, additional out-of-district placements for intensive needs students, and modest salary increases for our employees.

We have already presented our budget and responded to questions from the public. Our Annual Meeting was scheduled for March 17th, two days after our schools were closed due to the pandemic. At our Annual Meeting last year, the public added \$100,000 to our budget to enable an expansion of efforts to promote diversity, equity, and social justice. It has been several years since any of our district towns rejected a school budget. We have every reason to believe the voters would have approved our proposed budget.

Last week our Board was asked to send a letter to the legislature supporting the VSA/VSBA proposal to approve FY20 spending with a 4% inflator. You are in receipt of that letter. This was before anyone mentioned the possibility of the legislature approving our proposed budget as is. Although our Board has not had an opportunity to consider this option, I am confident they would prefer the legislature approve our proposed budget for FY21. The other options we are aware of would require reductions in the work I described above- reductions estimated between \$400,000 and \$7 million, depending on your actions.

David Schoales, Chair, WSESD