

Sonya Spaulding  
Board Chair, Barre City Elementary and Middle School  
3/14/19

Good afternoon,

My name is Sonya Spaulding and I serve as the board chair in Barre City and have been on the Barre City Elementary and Middle School board for the last 8 years. I provided testimony to the House Education Committee back in January. I also sent an email to all of you regarding my position on delaying the implementation of Act 46. I want to thank you for this opportunity to present my testimony in person.

Although our district falls under the umbrella of a forced merger, our community supports being merged and following the timeline as outlined in Act 46. This is evident from the fact that the voters of the City of Barre have supported the merger in two separate votes, the first in November 2016 and the second in November 2018. In addition to the support of the voters of Barre City, it is important to take into consideration the number of voters in Barre Town that also voted in favor of a merger. Over the course of the last 2 votes in both communities, and the re-votes in Barre Town, the majority of voters actually voted in favor of a merger (please see the table below for the results of each vote and re-vote). Most importantly, I would note that in the last re-vote in Barre Town, more people voted to merge than not to merge, but there were not enough votes to overturn the results of the original vote in November. One of the most unfortunate consequences of this final result is that we didn't get any of the incentive money. It has been frustrating that even though Barre City has been on board from the start, we are only one part of the equation. We will continue to move forward, regardless, and hope that as our communities are healing these wounds, we can all find common ground.

While I recognize that there are some communities that feel that they need more time, that is not the case for us. Even with the defeated votes and re-votes, our supervisory union has been slowly moving forward with the possibility that we may be forced to merge, knowing that we may have a small window of time to accomplish that merger. Our understanding of the law led us to believe that we would be forced to merge. The State Board of Education's decision in November confirmed that to be true. After that decision, we moved forward with a transitional board, which has already held a vote to amend the default articles of agreement. We have warned an election for April with a slate of candidates for the new board of the Barre Unified Union School District. We are reviewing a draft of a consolidated budget and are working toward the consolidation of policies. We hope the new board will warn our first consolidated budget vote for May. At this point, it will take more time and energy to undo the consolidation work that has already taken place if we have to delay, specifically with regards to our consolidated budget. It will also delay the inevitable outcome of merging our districts with no benefits to our students or our communities.

I do understand that some districts may be struggling to comply with the law as it was written, but I ask you to take into consideration that all of us have had the last 4 years to prepare for this. By delaying the implementation of these forced mergers, you are suggesting that some districts need special treatment, while the majority of districts have gone through the process of voluntary merger or are in the process of complying with the constraints of a forced merger. You are also suggesting that some districts can continue to delay the intended efficiencies of Act 46, which include larger economies of scale and cooperation. This may be the most important piece of the puzzle, since I believe we can all recognize that every school budget has an impact on every other district and budget in the

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state. When the Joint Fiscal Office recently recommended a change to the projected yield amount due to the increase in FY20 budgets across the state, that impacts all of us. Our consolidated budget, that has not been finalized or presented to voters yet, will have an additional 1 or 2 cents added to the tax rate, without us adding a dime to the overall spending due to the budgets of other districts. We all need Act 46 to be implemented without delay so we can all reap the benefits.

I also have seen that there is some discussion in this committee about a compromise that allows new boards to decide for themselves whether they should delay or not. In all honesty, this seems like another abdication of your responsibility. The VT legislature passed Act 46 and pushed the very difficult task of forcing districts to merge to the State Board of Education. It seems like you are trying to punt again and pass the tough decisions off to the new boards. While I recognize that you can't make everyone happy, you need to do what is best and right for our students and our taxpayers. We continue to hear about rising costs and education spending, but we have yet to have a full year of every district following Act 46. While our districts meet many of the goals of Act 46, including some of the lowest per pupil spending in the state, I believe that with every district moving toward consolidation and efficiencies, we can start to see results. Wasn't that one of the main reasons that the law was enacted in the first place?

When making your decision, I hope you will recognize that the public education system in Vermont has been a political lightning rod for at least the past 8 years. Some of the new initiatives and laws that come to mind include the consolidation of Special Education and Transportation under the Supervisory Union umbrella, Universal Pre-K, Proficiency Based Graduation requirements, Flexible Pathways, and most recently, Act 173 that addresses Special Education services and funding. In addition, our business office is in the process of the mandated switch to a Unified Chart of Accounts and the State-wide School District Data Management System. Our schools and the business of running our schools has been constantly under some mandate or change for many years. All of these laws and mandates have the very best of intentions of the students and taxpayers in mind. Each one hopes to address either inequities, rising costs or the quality of education for our students. The same can be said of Act 46. With this in mind, I ask that you please recognize that we need to keep moving forward. We have too much work to do to spend the time and energy undoing the work we have done.

Please do what is best for our students and what is best for our taxpayers. Do what is best for our communities. Please be clear and decisive and do not push this decision to the new boards or just push it off another year. Let us continue to move forward together.

Thank you for your time.

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November 2016 vote		
	yes	no
Barre City	2069	694
Barre Town	1611	2108
Total	3680	2802
January 2017 Re-Vote		
Barre Town	482	1159
November 2018 vote		
	yes	no
Barre City	1887	567
Barre Town	1262	2106
Total	3149	2673
January 2019 Re-Vote		
Barre Town	952	534
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>8263</b>	<b>7168</b>