

Herb Olson

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Rep. Kathryn Webb, Chair, House Education Committee
Rep. Lawrence Cupoli, Vice-Chair
Rep. Peter Conlon, Ranking Member
Rep. Kathleen James, Clerk
Representatives Arrison, Austin, Brady, Brown, Hooper, Roof, and Williams

Re: Drafting request #22-0675. School district mergers and withdrawals

Dear Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Herb Olson, a resident of Starksboro, Addison County. I testified before your committee two weeks ago concerning proposed amendments to the withdrawal process, and I also offered an alternative to the State Board's proposal earlier this week.

I am writing to make a last ditch effort to save our effective, equitable and treasured Robinson Elementary School from the terrible potential impacts of the proposed legislation.

The residents in our town are not eager to start the withdrawal process, but we feel we have been backed into a corner because the school district to which we belong proposed to close our elementary school. Then a merger study committee was formed with a neighboring district that, based on their deliberations so far, will take away our citizens' right (embedded in the district's articles of agreement) to vote before our school is closed. We considered beginning the withdrawal process last summer, when Lincoln started the process under a similar threat to their school, but we decided to wait and do all that we could to save our school without resorting to withdrawal. In the category of "no good deed goes unpunished", the proposed legislation now appears to foreclose an opportunity for a transitional process similar to Ripton, Stowe and Lincoln, and then, should a merger with a neighboring district occur in November, to make it virtually impossible to withdraw in order to save our school.

Perhaps Committee members or legislative counsel can come up with a better solution, but I offer the following to address Starksboro's situation.

Replace Sec. 6(a)(3) with the following. The highlighted text shows new matter:

(a) Application of this section. This section shall apply solely to a withdrawal action initiated by a town within a union district (petitioning town) pursuant to the provisions of 16 V.S.A. § 724 that were in effect prior to the effective date of Sec. 3 of this act (former § 724) if each of the following actions occurred prior to that date:
* * *

(3) the voters of each of the other towns within the union district ratified the petitioning town's proposal to withdraw, **except that this section 6 shall apply if the ratification vote occurred before October 31, 2022;**

The effect of this amendment would allow Starksboro to proceed with a withdrawal process under current law, under two conditions. First, the Starksboro vote to withdraw would need to occur before July 1, 2022. Second, the ratification vote in the other district towns would need to occur before October 31, 2022. This would allow Starksboro and the other district towns to have a thoughtful, deliberate dialogue concerning the future of the district, while allowing Starksboro the option to save its elementary school.

Thank you for your consideration,

Herb Olson