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Dear Chair Webb and Members of the House Committee on Education

In this time when our country and particularly our state of Vermont is worried about the state of Democracy, I find it so hard to believe the legislature and Vermont on a whole are acting in very undemocratic ways in many areas, but especially within our education system. The State Board of Education is comprised of nine voting members. They are not elected, but are hand picked by the Governor. The members of the present board have **all** been appointed by our present Governor and they have gained too much power over the people of the state. This became apparent during Act 46, when they totally over-ruled the votes of local communities and force merged these communities, who had followed the act 46 procedure, laid out in the law, developing Alternative Governance Structures, and holding town votes as to whether to merge or not. (in the WSESU, in southern Vermont, the vote in every town was overwhelmingly “NO” with a large turnout) These votes were considered as merely “**community sentiment**” and not binding votes by the SBOE. The legislature specifically required, towns to vote whether or not to merge, but the BOE completely overrode “NO” votes and only accepted “YES” votes. Was this democracy?

These members of the BOE are not elected officials. They are only citizens. They should not have this amount of power over the electorate. Who gave them the power? We as citizens certainly did not vote for them. Many of them have preconceived ideas believing larger districts are better, wanting to close, our small rural schools and even in favor of private schools, not public schools. Yet, you as legislators, give them along with the VSBA, the VSA, and the VPA more air time and more credence, than you do Vermont's citizens. Why are you not listening to our small communities, our teachers and town's people. These small rural communities are the life blood of Vermont. Why do nine people have more influence than thousands of us?

Even though several small communities have been stepped on by the BOE, the communities are still trying hard to retain what they value most.: their small community schools and the education of their children, without sending them miles away on a bus, to a larger school, where a lot of them get lost and do not do as well. However, you, as legislators, do have the opportunity to reverse this anti- democratic procedure.

As Act 46 was written, communities would have the opportunity to chart their own course, if their voters wanted to. They could write an Alternative Governance Structure. Many communities do. They were not listened to. Act 46 has five goals, none of which was addressed in the BOE hearings. The five goals are:

“To encourage and support local decisions and actions that:

1 – provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities

statewide;

2 - lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards, adopted

as rules by the State Board of Education at the direction of the General Assembly;

3 - maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and

and transfer resources with a goal of increasing the district-level ratio of students to

full time equivalent staff;

4 - promote transparency and accountability; and

5 - are delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value”

These five goals are admirable, and any educational plan should have included them. The BOE should have used them as their measuring stick, rather than force merging any community they could. Writing and requiring Educational Quality Standards could well be what the BOE could do. Forcing towns to do their bidding just because they can get away with it should not be allowed. The BOE has far too much power now.

As Act 46 was written, towns that were forced merged could vote to leave the school district and many have or are planning to do this. What you, as the Education Committee is considering now, pushed by the BOE, is a change in a law that has worked very well for sixty plus years. In this law there is a way for towns to exit a merged school district or even decide to merge with another town or two. Towns should not be chained to others just because nine people say so. Is this Democratic?

Also in the Act 46 law, there was a requirement that the legislature in the next few years, take a look to see if these goals were being met. This should be done by an outside body. I do not believe that this has been done. I am asking that you, as a legislative body, require that this study be done now, before any changes in the law are enacted.

Yes, I hope we are still a Democracy. Presently it is a thin rope we are hanging on to. I hope you, as legislators, think long and hard about this, before democracy is totally lost, as it has in other areas of our country and our world. Please respect your voters when writing any new laws. They are the ones who put you in Montpelier. You work for them. You don't rule them.

Thank you for taking my comments into consideration. Please do not make any changes to this law before a proper study is done and you get a lot more information. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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