

Senate Education Committee
H. 727 – Section 5
Stowe Withdrawal from LSUU
April, 8, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Leigh Pelletier. I moved to Vermont with my husband and three children thirteen years ago, and prior to that I was a practicing attorney in Massachusetts. Since moving here, I served on the Lamoille South Supervisory Union School Board, the Stowe School Board, and was a founding board member on the Lamoille South Unified Union School Board.

As Jim shared, throughout the long process that led to the merger of Stowe, Morrisville, and Elmore, the AOE and the VSBA and their lawyers provided school boards throughout our state with guidance on how to navigate through Act 46, and yet a forever-merger was never mentioned. What school board in its right mind wouldn't have taken the tax incentives and voluntarily merged, knowing it would be allowed to withdraw later, if it had been given proper notice and known that to do otherwise would lead to a forever merger?

Assurances of off ramps were provided by legislative leaders and the Governor openly, publicly and repeatedly when Act 46 was being discussed and approved. Yet, now for the first time, six years after this legislation was passed, we are being told that an off ramp doesn't exist specifically for one type of school district, ours; and the legislation before you now is aimed at further closing off ramps to others.

Throughout our Act 46 discussions with the state, it was never in dispute that Stowe and Elmore-Morrisville were two high functioning, relatively large side-by-side school districts; and both school boards were confident that the goals of Act 46 were being met. Looking at where we are now with the goals of Act 46:

(1) Provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide.

Stowe, Elmore, and Morrisville voted to dissolve the forced merger, because we do not see an increase in equity or quality of our schools since being forced to merge. As an example, during the 2020-2021 school year when schools across the state switched to remote and hybrid learning, we had one high school in our school district that provided Advanced Placement classes while the other high school did not. It is highly doubtful that this decision would have occurred if each school district had its own school board advocating for its students. Further, there was no reciprocity, and students were told the resources did not exist to allow them to take classes at the other high school -- an inequitable outcome.

Prior to merging, the two school boards had a longstanding history of ensuring that the students in their towns received those services that were deemed important to their communities. We worked collaboratively, and where one school found success, we looked to provide that in the other town's school if its school board deemed it a positive asset. As an example, Stowe started a successful Chinese foreign language program in its high school so steps were being taken to bring those classes to People's Academy. Then the forced merger occurred. As services and offerings have and continue to be reduced, this initiative fell to the wayside. We have taken steps back from equity, and none of the towns' schools are improved as a result of Act 46. The vote speaks for itself.

In addition, our school district has gone through 5 principals and 1 superintendent since we were forced to merge. Continuity in leadership is no longer a given in our communities.

The next two goals of Act 46:

(2) Lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards.

(3) Maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, with a goal of increasing the district-level ratio of students to full-time equivalent staff.

It's impossible to make any determinations about these two goals. The AOE has eliminated our school district's individual school performance data, resulting in our high schools losing their rankings by US News & World Report, and the most recent teacher:staff ratios available are from 2019 ([AOE Data & Reporting](#)). It is impossible for the public or for you, the Legislature, to make any determinations about whether these two goals are being achieved.

Data is necessary for transparency and accountability, and so the merger has resulted in our school district failing the fourth goal of Act 46.

(4) Promote transparency and accountability.

The AOE is well aware of its lack of data problem, and even though this problem was brought to their attention two years ago, the problem still isn't fixed. Educational decisions have and continue to be made without any supporting data. I ask the legislature to make data driven decisions when it comes to the educational laws of Vermont.

The last Act 46 goal: (5) Cost savings.

As Jim mentioned, since the merger two years ago, we went from spending \$14,939 per equalized student to spending \$17,069 per equalized student this fiscal year. This cost increase greatly exceeds inflation and state tax revenue increases over that time period.

One example of how the forced merger has resulted in a decrease in our operational efficiencies is the increased transportation costs for our students. The local vendor who had been providing busing for Stowe for decades was unwilling to take on the increased costs of adding more buses and drivers to submit a bid for the new unified union school district, and so the company chose not to bid. Not only did the forced merger eliminate a local company, but it increased our district's transportation costs by \$221,456/year, a 20% increase from pre-merger costs ([bus costs](#)).

The forced merger is a threat to the positive relationship that our towns have built over the decades of working together. There is a huge disparity in the capital improvements required for each high school, and it is significantly higher at Stowe High School. While I know there is a perception in our state that Stowe is doing just fine, what many don't know is that Stowe High School does not have walls for its classes but rather moveable partitions. From a school safety standpoint, I'm not sure how this is allowed. Further, the roof is leaking, the bathrooms haven't been upgraded since it was built, and the list goes on. If a bond is passed, the burden will fall on Morrisville and Elmore residents to pay for capital improvements that their students will not benefit from. How is this fair? Under the best of circumstances, it is difficult to get a bond passed; but under a commingled voting structure where towns

with different tax rates share the same budget that pays for schools that they don't share, it's near impossible.

The legislative intent of Act 46 was to respond to shrinking enrollment numbers for small school districts. To be clear, Stowe and Morrisville do not fit within this model. Both towns are growing with significantly increased levels of new housing being built right now.

There are no records anywhere that indicate that legislative intent meant for the Act 46 withdrawal provision to provide off ramps piecemeal rather than equally to all school districts throughout the state. I ask that you allow this section of the bill to pass through so that there is clarity that you did not intend to distinguish between unified union and union school districts. Clarity is required to ensure that our governmental agencies apply Act 46 in a consistent manner that affords all of our towns' residents with equal protection under the law.

Thank you.

Leigh Pelletier