



SLATE VALLEY UNIFIED UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

33 Mechanic Street, Fair Haven, VT 05743

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slatevalleyunified.org

Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent

Kristin H. Benway, Director of Special Services

Cheryl Scarzello, Director of Finance

Casey O'Meara, Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment

Christopher G. Cole, Director of Operations

To: Vermont House Education Committee

From: Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent, Slate Valley School District

Re: School Budget Revotes

Date: March 14, 2024

For the record, I am Brooke Olsen-Farrell, a 25-year veteran educator. I have served as the Superintendent of Schools in the Slate Valley Unified Union School District for the past seven years. I appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts on unprecedented statewide budget failures and the context within the Slate Valley Unified Union School District. Our district serves the towns of Fair Haven, Castleton, Benson, West Haven, and Hubbardton in Rutland County, and Orwell in Addison County.

Unfortunately, this year our school district is among those that did not pass a budget. The results were 1004 yes to 1468 no. The budget failed by a margin of 464, the largest margin ever recorded for our district. This marks our fourth budget failure in the past five years.

The failed budget aimed to address critical needs and enhance the overall educational experience for our students. According to Act 127, our district is classified as “advantaged”. We are one of the lowest-spending districts in the state, and also one of the most impoverished. Our community seems to pride itself on being at the bottom in terms of spending statewide. We always aim at being fiscally responsible and conservative. So much so that of the 107 reporting districts, Slate Valley Unified Union School District is the 16th lowest in the state, yet our community still



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could not support the presented budget. While the outcome was not what we had hoped for, we respect and acknowledge the democratic nature of our community.

Our top priority remains providing the best possible education for our students, and we will continue to work diligently to find alternative solutions in light of the budget failure. However, I am extremely concerned about the reality of passing a budget in the current climate of our community and what this means for the students we serve. Over the last five years, we have reduced over 28 positions, closed a school, and experienced a decrease in education spending. Our projected homestead tax rate in FY23 was \$2.08, but due to Act 46, it was reduced to \$1.27. While Act 46 was a partial success, it did not go far enough, and local communities do not have the will to see it through. This would require tough decision making that must come from leadership at the top.

Contracts for staffing need to be issued by April 1st; after that date, there will be little to no movement in staff reductions, only through attrition. If this situation persists, the only items we could consider cutting would be transportation, extracurricular activities, maintenance, and afterschool programs. However, all of these have direct negative impacts on students and drive them yet further away from equitable outcomes.

Our district has been extremely active in the community in terms of outreach and messaging, but unfortunately, the community is not buying into the message. Many are concerned about cost and seek tax relief, while others argue that we aren't spending enough and are depriving students of essential resources. This has polarized the community, as evidenced in our recent Finance Committee Meeting. The majority of the Finance Committee opposed any budget cuts, feeling



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that our students would be further disadvantaged. Conversely, another board member advocated for over a 1 million dollar cut. The conversation was dynamic and emotional. Ultimately, the Finance Committee recommended a new budget for a vote on April 11th with a \$150,000 cut to the expenditure budget; this results in a \$1.15 Equalized Homestead Tax Rate which is a **decrease** of 1.31%, with one member dissenting. Our education spending per equalized pupil is slated to be \$11,321; this is the budget that failed. The district directly to our north Addison Central passed a budget with spending of \$16,099. This is illustrative of the huge inequities within our current state system. At this time, we have at least one board member who has stated that he will publicly advocate against the passage of the budget in the next vote. None of this is beneficial for our students.

It is the state's responsibility to provide equitable education for all students in Vermont. What does the state consider "good enough"? What is the vision for public education? Only then should we discuss how to fund it. Without a vision, we are adrift in a sea of chaos and polarization, which is harmful to all our communities and the future of Vermont as a state.