

Mountain Views School District's Pathway to a Voluntary Act 46 Merger

Good afternoon, members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences in achieving a voluntary merger through the Act 46 process. I am Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of the Mountain Views Supervisory Union. We are a district of seven communities, including the towns of Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Pittsfield, Pomfret, Reading, and Woodstock, with just over 1,000 students.

Act 46 was designed to encourage local school districts and supervisory unions to explore the potential benefits of consolidating their existing school boards into a single, unified district responsible for serving—in our case—every student in the Windsor Central Supervisory Union (WCSU). The intent of the bill was to restructure school governance throughout the state of Vermont in the interest of improving educational quality at a more affordable cost. Overall, the goal of Act 46 was to improve student outcomes and equity by creating larger and more efficient school governance structures, similar to the goals of Act 73.

WCSU's bold aspiration was to improve the overall performance of our districts—to make our good schools absolutely great.

The Exploratory Stage

In the summer of 2015, the school boards of Barnard, Bridgewater, Pomfret, Killington, Reading, and Woodstock voted to form a 706 Study Committee to review and assess current patterns of governance within WCSU.

Over 16 months, the committee met bimonthly in open session. It attempted to maintain a transparent record of its work through ongoing postings to the SU's website, including its meeting schedule, minutes, working documents, and draft findings. Prior to completing the Act 46 report, the committee held multiple public forums in participating communities on a variety of issues related to district unification to elicit feedback. The committee used that feedback to revise and strengthen its final report and recommendations. Finally, the committee submitted its report to each of the school boards in Windsor Central for review and comment.

Through numerous meetings, Windsor Central's Act 46 Committee explored the potential benefits and challenges of unifying the school districts into a single district governed by one school board. This work centered on one overriding question:

How would unification benefit our children? Specifically, how would a new, unified governance structure provide better, more equitable instructional opportunities and better support students in achieving or exceeding the State's Educational Quality Standards?

The committee expected that any comprehensive study would fully address these questions and clearly articulate to parents, students, and community members: *What would change, and what would remain the same under any recommended governance model?*

The committee identified and examined:

- The central questions guiding their study of unification
- The opportunities and challenges of unification—educational, cultural, financial, and operational
- Current enrollment and staffing patterns in each local district
- Financial and tax implications of a merger among WCSU districts, including potential incentives under the law and possible loss of hold-harmless funds and small schools grants

Beginning in May 2016, the committee held 14 public meetings in Barnard, Woodstock, Killington, Reading, and Pomfret.

Using feedback from parents and community members, the committee worked to:

- Identify a coherent set of educational, financial, and operational principles to guide any unification process, should it be recommended to voters
- Create a clear vision and educational model to ensure every student in Windsor Central has an equitable opportunity to achieve a world-class education

The Act 46 Study Committee – Final Report

Based on study committee discussions and community forum input, the group noted that each school district in the supervisory union faced instructional challenges requiring creative, thoughtful, and focused attention if students were to reach their full potential. Collectively, the recommendations were designed to improve instructional cohesiveness, equity, and opportunity, thereby enhancing outcomes for all students.

Examples of potential opportunities included:

- A coordinated PreK–8 standards-based reading and writing curriculum
- A coordinated PreK–8 standards-based mathematics curriculum
- Cohesive support for teachers in PreK–12 literacy and mathematics
- Instructional coaching for teachers
- Development of a standards-based PreK–12 NGSS science curriculum
- A uniform local assessment system
- A system-wide supervision and evaluation model
- Collaborative opportunities for teachers to work on curriculum and instruction

In addition, the committee believed that creating a single unified school board would strengthen governance and accountability across PK–12 by:

- Improving opportunities for teacher leadership across content areas
- Strengthening instructional practices through a coordinated professional development system
- Coordinating the delivery of school programs
- Expanding options such as universal Pre-K
- Ensuring common academic and behavioral expectations
- Developing a common report card system

- Strengthening alignment of special education services

Summary Conclusion

The committee saw significant potential to improve student learning and outcomes. It concluded that disparities in achievement among students living in close proximity were unacceptable and that a more unified system could better serve all learners.

By thinking of the districts as parts of a whole rather than independent components, the committee believed a PK–12 system could be developed to maximize student potential.

The committee also found that accountability and transparency would result in shared educational experiences across:

Academics

- Uniform classroom practices and materials
- Equitable resource distribution
- Student-to-teacher ratios
- Administrative support
- Easier transitions from elementary to middle/high school

Workforce

- A unified salary grid
- Consistent working conditions (calendar, benefits, schedule)
- Standardized job descriptions enabling staff mobility
- A clearly defined MVSU organizational chart

Districtwide Resources

- Facilities Director
- School Nutrition Director
- Literacy and math facilitators
- Facility upgrades

The committee then drafted Articles of Agreement addressing:

- Composition and representation of the unified school board
- Financial implications, including assets and liabilities
- A first-year operational plan (transportation, staffing, contracts, curriculum, leadership)
- Additional community concerns

After 4 task force meetings, 27 study committee meetings, and 14 community forums, the Windsor Central Joint 706 Study Committee voted on January 18, 2017, to accept the Act 46 report and Articles of Agreement. Upon approval by the State Board of Education, the question was presented

to voters in March 2017. Due to initial “no” votes in two towns, the merger was not finalized until July 2019.

During the study process, the committee had access to a facilitator; however, this individual lacked sufficient understanding of the regional context and complexity.

Access to a trained facilitator with Act 46 experience—particularly one who has served as a Vermont superintendent or business manager—would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of merger discussions. Additionally, a state-level lead facilitator could provide regional support and intervene when necessary.

Recommended compensation:

- \$50,000 per facilitator
- \$60,000 for a lead facilitator

Legal consultation is also essential. Legal fees for Windsor Central Supervisory Union from 2016 to 2019 exceeded \$30,000.

Achieving a voluntary merger across seven communities required extensive meetings and votes. This was neither a simple nor a quick process. I had the honor of participating in every meeting as Director of Student Support Services. These conversations were deeply personal and constructive.

As a result of becoming a merged district, Mountain Views Supervisory District is now a vibrant and successful learning community. I do not believe this level of student achievement would have been possible without unification.

The merger enabled:

- A unified contract
- A unified curriculum
- A unified strategic plan, Portrait of a Graduate, and policies
- Unified instructional practices
- A unified board supporting instructional leadership
- A unified budget aligned with strategic priorities
- A unified faculty and staff aligned with district goals

In my experience, “unified” is synonymous with opportunity, efficiency, and effectiveness.

I am proud to serve as Superintendent of Mountain Views Supervisory District and confident that this merger has made a meaningful difference for all students.

Thank you again for your time and consideration as you explore further opportunities for voluntary mergers in Vermont. I welcome your questions and thoughts regarding my testimony.