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## **Only the Voters Decide**

**Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education**

Statewide, about 80% of our children live in communities that educate their children in schools that they operate at all grade levels. These schools include small town elementary schools, and both town-based high schools, and larger union high schools. These larger union schools – like Rivendell, CVU and North Country – were created when smaller communities came together to provide greater opportunities for their children.

Approximately 20% of our children live in communities that tuition their children in all grades or that operate some grades and pay tuition for the remaining grades. Tuition students represent approximately 7% of all students statewide. Instead of working with neighbors to build a school, these small communities chose to educate their children in some or all grades by paying tuition to other schools. Currently, 75% of publicly-tuitioned students in Vermont attend public schools in neighboring districts. Most of the remaining publicly-tuitioned students attend selective independent schools either in Vermont or beyond.

There has recently been a great hue and cry, complete with an online video representing tuition districts as cans being shot off a fence, implying that “school choice” in Vermont is under assault by Act 46. The clamor has little grounding in fact.

The reality is that in the last year, only four districts chose by a vote of the electorate to end tuitioning and instead share in the operation and governance of a public school. In these communities, voters came to this conclusion after counting where their “choice” students went to school, and realizing that for the most part, they attended the neighboring public school. By voting to partner with their neighbors, these communities now have a voice in school governance and budget. In every one of these cases, the voters chose operating over tuitioning by large margins. This is democracy in action.

In contrast, some communities, facing declining enrollments, voted to close their small schools and pay tuition. Concord, Guildhall, East Haven, Morgan, Plymouth, Granby, Granville/Hancock, after much deliberation, voted to close schools and provide tuition vouchers, letting their students pursue education in the schools that they can reach and which will allow them to attend. This is also democracy in action.

What all Vermont communities have in common is an obligation to educate their children, either by providing tuition or operating a school. Only the school district, by a vote of the electorate, can decide whether to educate its children by operating a school or paying tuition. This is true under Act 46, as it was before Act 46.

What has changed under Act 46 is that all districts are being challenged to evaluate whether they are providing high quality education in an equitable way, at a price they can afford in the context of Vermont's aging population, declining enrollment, and increasing costs. Some districts that operate schools are reaching out to neighbors to see if partnering and sharing resources enables them to expand opportunities for children at lower cost. Others are looking hard at the cost of tuition, and evaluating whether they want to have a voice in how their children are educated and a greater guarantee that their children will have equitable opportunities. Others districts are adamant that tuitioning and education markets will provide the best opportunities for their children. Voters in these districts will make different decisions based on their region, their local opportunities, their perception of equity challenges and their cost pressures.

Under Act 46, however, the first choice every district makes is whether it wants to educate its students by operating a school or paying tuition, and at which grades. Only the voters can decide.