

Windham Southwest Supervisory Union

Item N-2



Act 46 Study Committee's Final Report

&

Articles of Agreement

For

Twin Valley Study Committee
Southern Valley Study Committee
Searsburg Self Study

Preamble of the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union Act 46 Report

The following study and report of the two Windham Southwest Supervisory Union (hereinafter known as the WSSU) Act 46 Study Committees and an Alternative Model, is the product of an 18 month study by the Twin Valley Act 46 Study Committee and the Southern Valley Act 46 Study Committee, working both independently and collectively. Also, the non-operating district of Searsburg has been working to find non-operating partners during this study period. The six districts in the WSSU concluded that a joint effort and study would best meet the needs of all member districts.

The study you are about to review was predated by a number of inquiries and meetings with other school districts in the surrounding areas and an earlier report to the Vermont Agency of Education. After comprehensive exploration, negotiations, and community decisions, the study committee believes this plan will best meet the needs of all children in the six participating districts. Both Act 46 Study Committees understand that unification may not solve the fiscal challenges caused by decreasing enrollments in the districts but will give them greater capacity to help address these problems.

The plan presented is inclusive and does not leave any school districts isolated. Looking at the WSSU region, the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union borders to the east, the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union borders to the west, the Windham Central Supervisory Union borders on the north and the Massachusetts border serves as its southern boundary.

The current structure of the WSSU includes the towns of Wilmington, Whitingham, Halifax, Readsboro, Stamford and Searsburg. Five out of the six towns operate their own schools within the district. Searsburg, a non-operating district, pays tuition for PreK-12 students. Wilmington and Whitingham currently make up the Twin Valley Schools and contract to operate their schools jointly with a grade PreK-5 school located in Wilmington and a grade 6-12 middle-high school that is located in Whitingham. Readsboro, Stamford, and Halifax, the Southern Valley Towns, all operate grade PreK-8 schools, and pay tuition for grades 9-12.

WSSU encompasses approximately 246 square miles, traversed by mountain roads. It spans Vermont's entire southern border with Massachusetts except for the towns of Pownal on the west, and Vernon and Guilford on the east. It is important to understand the geography of the land to understand the distance between these districts and the difficulty, time, and hazards of traveling many of these roads. Although towns are next to each other on a map, in most cases there is no direct route that buses can travel without putting the safety of students at risk. It takes an average time of 30 minutes to travel between schools in adjoining towns. With bus routes, traffic, and adverse weather conditions, travel time can double; at times, roads are impassable. If schools were closed or if students attended classes at other schools, they would likely get on the bus as early as 5:30 a.m. and get home as late as 6:00 p.m.

For approximately twenty years, WSSU had one superintendent. This administrator developed a knowledge of the communities, but focused on the operation of the supervisory union. Each town school district evolved independently with its school board and principal taking responsibility for the direction and operation of the individual town school.

In October of 2012 when the superintendent retired, the Vermont State Board required the WSSU to conduct a boundary study to determine whether WSSU districts would be better served by being realigned with different supervisory unions, and a temporary superintendent was hired. The boundary study was completed by April, 2014. Two VSBA consultants, Wayne Gersen and John Everitt, conducted the boundary study (Appendix to the Preamble). The report described commonalities and differences among the districts comprising the WSSU, and offered proposals for alternative boundary configurations that were declined by the individual districts and the surrounding supervisory unions. The outcome of this 2014 Boundary Study was that the WSSU member school districts remain the same.

In the three years since this study, there has been further discussion about cooperation between the Windham Central and Windham Southwest Supervisory Unions. Discussions are now on hold pending resolution of changes that need to be made within each supervisory union to meet the requirements of Act 46. In those discussions during the fall of 2015, there were no significant educational benefits for students or financial benefits for taxpayers identified.

A new superintendent was hired in July of 2014. In the past few years, the Vermont legislature changed governance of supervisory unions, assigning new responsibilities at the SU level. The new responsibilities of the supervisory union have called on WSSU to develop a different relationship with the member town school districts, and the superintendent has successfully implemented those changes. The changes required were not simple ones for the WSSU and profoundly influenced a change in culture and operation. Before the change, the WSSU Board and central office had responsibilities that could be delivered cooperatively, but individually, to the town school districts. After the change, a much more collaborative and integrated delivery of services was needed. To accomplish the increased responsibilities of WSSU, substantive change was needed from the WSSU Board, the town school district boards, and the central office administration. Curriculum responsibilities changed from coordination to more direct control, with the hiring of a full-time curriculum and technology integration coordinator. Special education changed from building-based to a supervisory union responsibility, with a special education coordinator and centralized hiring of teachers and non-professional staff. Transportation and the fiscal side of food service are now managed at the central office. Beginning with 2017, the supervisory union will negotiate a contract for each school district with hope that by doing so each district's contract will share common terms, language, salary schedules and benefits. All WSSU schools are governed by policy manuals that are closely aligned in regards to supervision and evaluation, hiring practices, professional development, and central office business practices.

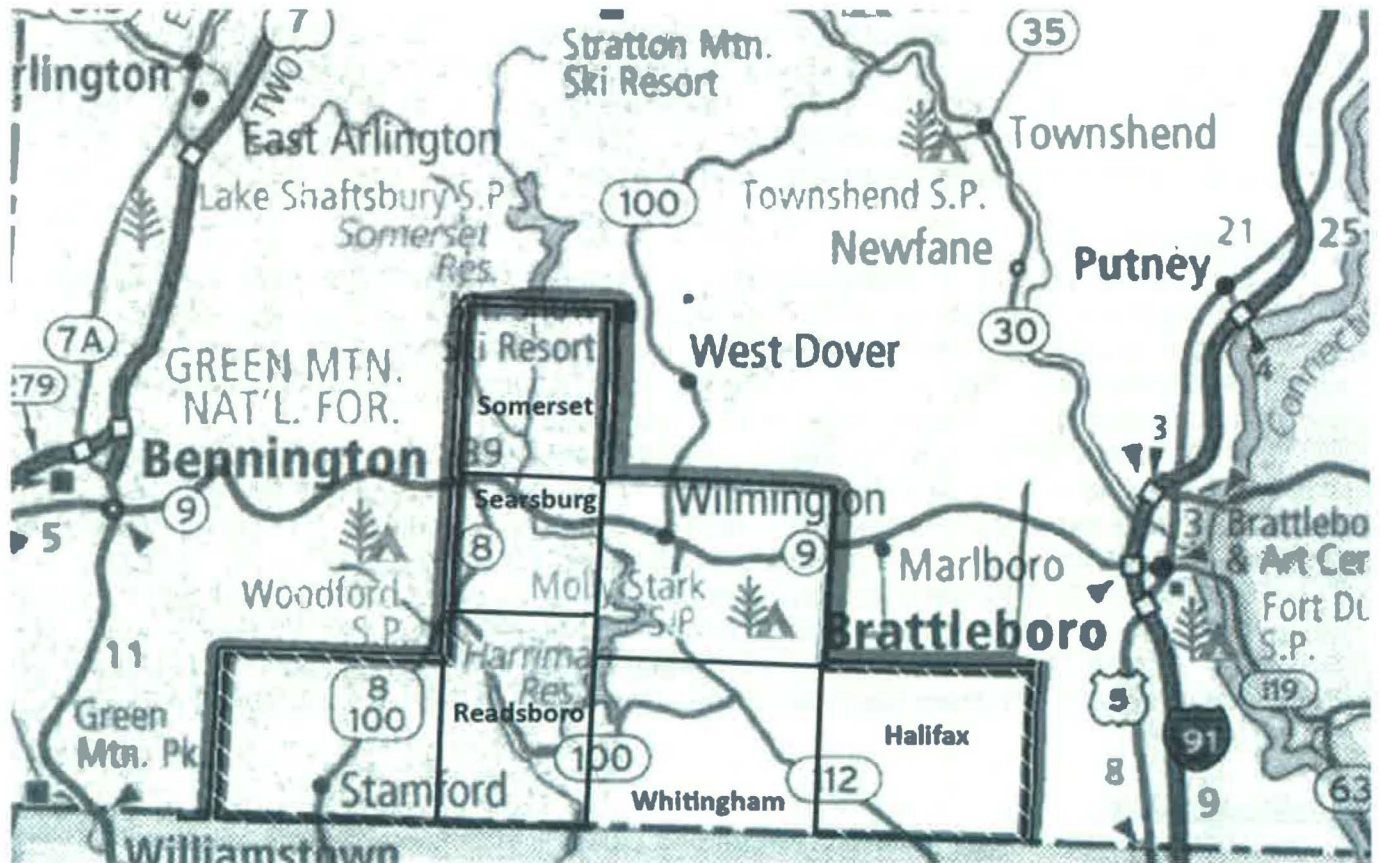
During the past 18 months Windham Southwest has reached out to various towns outside of our Supervisory Union. Several public meetings were held at the Readsboro Central School which had participation by the schools districts of Dover, Wardsboro and Marlboro. These meetings were to explore the various options for the small schools that have similar student populations. The Southern Valley subcommittee had several meetings with the Marlboro School that is part of Windham Central Supervisory Union. During these meetings, the Southern Valley subcommittee had asked the Marlboro School to join them as part of a side by side. After several meetings, and looking at the financials, it was determined that the Marlboro School had a much higher per pupil spending than the other three schools of Readsboro, Halifax and Stamford. The higher per pupil spending in Marlboro would have increased the taxes of Readsboro by (0.1644), Stamford by (0.2011), Halifax by (0.0002) and would have reduced the taxes in Marlboro by (0.33). This was not acceptable to Readsboro, Stamford, and Halifax; however, they still wanted to explore and invite Marlboro to the table. After several months of talking, Marlboro was not willing to commit to being part of the Southern Valley study committee, so the committee continued without Marlboro.

Searsburg and Stratton were considering the implications of becoming a non-operating unified district. They tried to find a common ground but found the distance between the two districts and the disparity in tax rates prevented further negotiations.

Windham Southwest has been actively working with other districts and supervisory unions in Windham County to insure that no district would be left isolated; however, we have had no luck in getting any districts outside of Windham Southwest to commit to unification or a change in supervisory union boundaries.

The Twin Valley and Southern Valley Act 46 Study Committees are recommending to the Vermont State Board of Education that the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union create two Unified Union Districts that would meet the requirements of the side by side model. This proposal would reduce the number of districts in the supervisory union from six (6) districts to three (3) districts. Wilmington and Whitingham (PreK-12), currently contracted to operated schools jointly, propose to form a Unified Union School District and become one side of a side by side. Halifax, Readsboro and Stamford, which operate PreK-8 schools and pay tuition for grades 9-12 students, would vote to form a Unified Union School District and become the second side of a side by side. We are also suggesting the inclusion of Searsburg in the Supervisory Union as a non-operating district. It would be extremely important to not leave Searsburg isolated.

Map and Size of the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union



Town	Sq. Mile Area	Population	Year
Somerset	28.1	2	2011
Stamford	39.5	824	2010
Readsboro	36.5	763	2010
Searsburg	21.6	109	2010
Whitingham	39.3	1357	2010
Wilmington	41.3	1876	2010
Halifax	39.8	720	2010
Totals	246.1	5,651	
Population Density per a sq. mile	22.96		

Appendix to the Preamble
Interim Report:
Windham Southwest Boundary Change Study

Background Information:

In October 2012, the Vermont State Board placed the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union under the consideration for a supervisory union boundary change, limiting them to hiring a Superintendent of schools for a two year period while a boundary study was completed. The board action called for the district to complete the boundary study with final recommendations by April 30, 2014, and to submit an interim progress report in October 2013.

Action Taken to Date:

In the winter of 2012-13, Windham Central Supervisory Union (WCSU) agreed to partner with Windham Southwest Supervisory Union (WSSU) in the boundary study. Because they were undergoing a RED governance study and had at least one town whose students paid tuition to attend Twin Valley secondary schools, WCSU was open to engaging within the boundary study and perceived potential mutual benefits as a result of their participation.

In June 2013 WSSU hired the Vermont School Board Association to conduct the boundary study. At a meeting with the consultant, the WCSU Board Chair and Superintendent, the WSSU Board Chair determined that the next step would be to convene a meeting of all contiguous districts to determine the feasibility of making boundary changes in the entire region.

On October 2, 2013, the chairs and superintendents from four of the five southern Vermont supervisory unions- WSSU, WCSU, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union (WNESU), and Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU)-- met and reviewed various boundary options. Representatives from Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU) were invited but were unable to attend.

Findings to Date:

- There was no interest in realignment among those districts present at the meeting, though a representative from the Halifax Board indicated their district might be open to aligning with Windham Southeast Supervisory Union since the majority of their students attend Brattleboro High School.
- There was interest in pursuing the establishment of a district serving districts without operating schools. In the five Supervisory Unions in Southern Vermont there are five communities that meet these criteria: Glastenbury (SVSU); Searsburg and Somerset (WSSU); and Stratton and Winhall (WCSU).
- There was some interest in exploring the possibility of Stamford creating an interstate district with Massachusetts since the majority of their students opt to attend North Adams High School.

Wayne Gersen, Vermont School Boards Association Educational Consultant

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Section 1: Committee Members

**MEMBERSHIP OF THE TWIN VALLEY (WILMINGTON, WHITINGHAM)
ACT 46 STUDY COMMITTEE**

Seth Boyd (Chairperson)	Whitingham
Sharon Berry	Whitingham
John Doty	Whitingham
Janna Ewart	Wilmington
Kathy Larsen	Wilmington
Therese Lounsbury	Wilmington

**MEMBERSHIP OF THE SOUTHERN VALLEY (HALIFAX, STAMFORD & READSBORO)
ACT 46 STUDY COMMITTEE**

Homer Sumner (Chairperson)	Halifax
Paul Blais	Halifax
Mary King	Readsboro
Susan Bailey	Readsboro
Cynthia Lamore	Stamford
Erika Bailey	Stamford
Barbara Malinowski	Stamford

Supporting the Committees

Christopher A. Pratt	Superintendent
Karen Atwood	Business Administrator
Mike RobbGrieco	Director of Curriculum and Tech. Integration
Pietro Lynn	Attorney
Steve Sanborn	Act 46 Project Consultant

See the links for the April 18, 2017 Agenda Items #N-2 A and N-2 B for the proposals of the Twin Valley and the Southern Valley study committees (draft Articles of Agreement, Analysis, Worksheets, etc.)

**Section 4:
Searsburg Self-Study**

**Searsburg School District
Alternative Governance Structure
Self Study**

**An Alternative Self Study for the Searsburg School District to be included with
the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union Act 46 Study Committee's Final
Report.**

This study is presented to the Vermont State Board of Education to demonstrate that the Searsburg School District is in compliance with the requirements of ACT 46 and the goals of a sustainable governance model that provides its students with increased educational opportunities while remaining economically efficient.

1. Introduction

a. Searsburg is a town in southwestern Vermont encompassing 21.58 square miles. Searsburg sits between Wilmington to the East and Woodford to the West, Readsboro to the south. Most of the northerly border lies within the Green Mountain National Forest with the unincorporated town of Somerset along part of the border. The town is geographically separated in the center by a steep mountain range. The main route over the mountain is Route 9. Route 9 is a notorious stretch of road known for being a dangerous route in the winter. Law requires trucks to chain up from either side of the mountain and rarely a snow squall occurs that the road is not shut down for some period of time. At the top of the mountain Route 9 intersects with Route 8, which runs the top of the mountain ridgeline south into Readsboro. Route 8 is also known to be a dangerous route during winter weather.

b. The population of Searsburg remains stable with a current population of 109 people. Very few people move into or out of town. In the three years prior to this report there were only three residential sales in the town. Only one of which is occupied as a primary residence.

c. Searsburg offers full school choice for grades Pre-K to 12. For the 2016-2017 school year Searsburg has 21 total students, 11 students in grades Pre-K through 6 and 10 students in grades 7 through 12. Searsburg students attend 9 different schools in 8 different districts and 2 states. 17 of which attend public schools, 3 attend private schools with 1 student attending a vocational high school. Searsburg has no phantom students.

Many different factors contribute to the wide range of educational choices made by Searsburg families. Some factors include but are not limited to: Geography and travel distance, winter travel difficulties, the location of parents' jobs, academic opportunities, extracurricular and afterschool programs offered, sports programs, music and arts programs and internships with job placement opportunities. Searsburg pays the announced tuition rate for all public schools and the Vermont State average to all private schools, or the entire private school tuition, whichever is less. Parents and families are able to make the choice taking into account each individual student's strengths, needs and interests with the full support of an actively involved school board. Thus allowing students to meet and exceed the Educational Quality Standard in whichever environment is best suited for the individual.

Elementary Schools (Pre-K - 6)				
School Name	School Type	Number of Students	FY 17 Announced Tuition	Total FY17 Tuition Cost
Twin Valley ES (WSSU)	Public	4	\$13,500	\$52,515
Woodford (SWVT)	Public	2	\$10,500	\$21,000
Bennington Head Start	Public	1	\$3,092	\$3,092
Dover (WCSU)	Public	2	\$13,500	\$27,000
Hilltop Montessori	Private	2	\$12,938	\$25,876
Average Per Pupil & Total Cost		11	\$10,706.00	\$129,483
Secondary Schools (7-12)				
School Name	School Type	Number of Students	FY 17 Announced Tuition	Total FY17 Tuition Cost
Twin Valley MHS (WSSU)	Public	7	\$14,750	\$103,250
Readsboro (WSSU)	Public	1	\$8,500	\$8,500
Burr & Burton	Private	1	\$14,773	\$14,772
McCann Tech	Voc.	1	\$16,464	\$16,464
Average Per Pupil & Total Cost		10	\$13,621.75	\$142,986

2. Searsburg and Windham Southwest Supervisory Relationship

a. The relationship between the WSSU and the Searsburg School Board is strong. Communication between the board and the WSSU is frequent and productive. Searsburg board members often look to multiple members of the Supervisory Office including the business manager, administrative personnel and the Superintendent with questions or concerns with satisfactory and timely outcomes. Searsburg holds 12 regular monthly meetings and it is routine for a representative of the Supervisory Office to attend. Generally either the Superintendent or the business manager depending on the items on the agenda and which of them could provide the best support.

b. The Windham Southwest Supervisory Union includes the districts (in its current structure) of Twin Valley, Whitingham, Wilmington, Readsboro, Stamford, Halifax and Searsburg. Searsburg has only 1 vote on both the Supervisory Board and the Executive Board. However small Searsburg voice is on these boards Searsburg feels it is heard loud and clear and received fairly with equal attention. Searsburg participates in nearly all Super Board and Executive Board meetings and WSSU wide committees in turn.

3. Act 46 Research and Cooperation with other districts

- a. From the first time Searsburg heard mention of Act 156 the board gave it full attention. Early in the process after a few months of seeking information and answers to questions regarding our possible options to move forward we held an informational meeting for our town. On October 29, 2015, 20 voters attended out of 109 registered voters in the town. The board presented 3 possible options to the town. 1. Merge with the three similarly operating districts within the WSSU that had elementary schools but high school choice. 2. Merge with Twin Valley who operates schools for Pre-K through 12. 3. Seek out other non-operating district outside of the WSSU. All audience members supported, by show of hands support to seek out another "like" districts in the interest of keeping the current Pre-K through 12 choice. Approximately half of the meetings attendees supporting choice did not have a current student enrolled or would not have a current student enrolled by 2017. Further discussion included
- b. Searsburg first approached Stratton, another non-operating school district of similar size within the Windham Central Supervisory Union at a regular Stratton Board meeting on October 1, 2015. The Searsburg Board Chair Jacki Murano with support from Searsburg State Representative Laura Sibilias both spoke to the Stratton Board suggesting that Searsburg and Stratton start a discussion about the possibility of merger. Stratton was in the very early stages of processing the ACT 46 information and had been approached by the Winhall School Board as well. At that time Stratton had no further interest.
- c. Searsburg subsequently joined a Study Committee of non-operators from the school districts of Granville, Hancock and Pittsfield in November of 2015. While the logistics became an instantly daunting feat because of distance between Searsburg and the three other boards, Searsburg continued with the study. In the end the Searsburg School Board concluded that there was no benefit to our town or students and in fact the distance would make a merger difficult. The board also concluded that having a Supervisory office in close proximity for support and accountability was a priority not met by the proposed merger. With the intent to be fully informed Searsburg continued to monitor and attend the Southern Valley Study committee meetings during this time. Searsburg also considered the possibility of merging with Somerset, which shares a border. The Searsburg School board was informed that a merger with Somerset was not possible as Somerset was an "unincorporated town" and not eligible.
- d. In April of 2016, Searsburg was contacted by the Marty Nadler, Chair of the Winhall School Board. He proposed that Searsburg enter into a formal study committee with Searsburg, Stratton, Winhall and Sandgate to form a RED within the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union. The Searsburg School district discussed this possible merger at great length with the WSSU Superintendent, The Stratton School District, The BRSU Superintendent and both the Searsburg State Representative Laura Sibilias and the Stratton/Winhall State Representative Oliver Olsen. With some reluctance and concern that the voters of Searsburg would not approve such a merger Searsburg agreed to participate in the hopes that there would be unforeseen benefits to such a merger. By August of 2016 The Searsburg board was concerned that a meeting had not been set up for the first RED meeting within the BRSU. Searsburg began to seek out information from the BRSU to have a preliminary idea of what a merger would mean for Searsburg. Searsburg requests for information were denied under the pretense that the information would be shared once the committee began their study. This response only amplified Searsburg concerns over joining with a much larger SU that we had no previous relationship with.

e. Stratton and Searsburg voted to join a formal study committee in September of 2016 to investigate the possibility of a merger as a side by side within the WSSU. The committee met by weekly in the WSSU office which is a central location between the two towns and was provided great support by the WSSU Superintendent, Chris Pratt and Business Manager Karen Atwood. Both towns are very similar in size and student population, both is non-operating districts for grade Pre-K through 12, both had a long history of supporting school choice. The two towns are 20 miles apart. The joint committee was optimistic that we had found our solution.

f. On November 3rd 2016 Searsburg and Stratton attended a WSSU Superboard meeting and question and answer session with Donna Russo Savage and Brad James. During that meeting Searsburg and Stratton learned two pieces of information that were pivotal in our merger discussion.

1. That no 5% tax penalty would be applied for School Boards that chose not to merge.
2. That the state was not requiring boards to merge and that they could in fact remain standalone under an alternative structure, thus removing the only two benefits seen by the committee to merge boards at that time. Stratton withdrew from the formal study committee.

g. On November 21 the Searsburg School Board sent a letter to all property owners on the Grand List with notification of an ACT 46 Community Information Session being held on December 1st, 2016. During the information session the board provided the new information and the consensus was overwhelmingly from both the board and the town to move forward as a standalone district within the WSSU.

4. Current Act 46 Status

The Searsburg School District has concluded through multiple study committees, active involvement with many surrounding districts, participation and or guidance from both our State Representative and Superintendents of our current SU, the BRSU and Windham Central Supervisory Union and by review of the information provided by the Agency of Education, specifically Donna Russo Savage that there is no benefit to our students or our taxpayers through any possible merger at this time. Searsburg and Stratton continue to support each other informally by sharing information throughout the process but see no benefit in a merger of the two districts.

5. Proposal for Alternative Structure

Searsburg School District feels very strongly that we are well informed and have exhausted all avenues available to us throughout this process and into the Self Study. We are confident that our current model is the most beneficial for our students and our taxpayers. Students are afforded every opportunity to excel and exceed the ACT 46 goals under our current structure and we are still able to be cost effective with an average per pupil spending of \$10,706 in Pre K through 6 and \$13,621 for 7 through 12. Searsburg wishes to continue as a standalone Pre-K through 12 non-operating district within the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union.

Conclusion

The comprehensive study and report of the Twin Valley Act 46 Study Committee and the Southern Valley Act 46 Study Committee including Halifax, Readsboro, Stamford, Wilmington, Whitingham, and Searsburg has demonstrated a practical and reasonable plan that will best meet the needs of all students in the six participating districts.

The plan you have reviewed is inclusive and does not leave any districts in the WSSU isolated. There were many discussions with districts outside the supervisory union during this process but none seemed to meet the needs of participating communities or the students in those communities.

The Twin Valley Act 46 Plan has proposed the unification of Wilmington and Whitingham, which currently contract to operate schools jointly. This appears to be a next logical step in bringing these two communities together and sharing fiscal responsibility for all children in the two communities. They would be the first side of a side by side model.

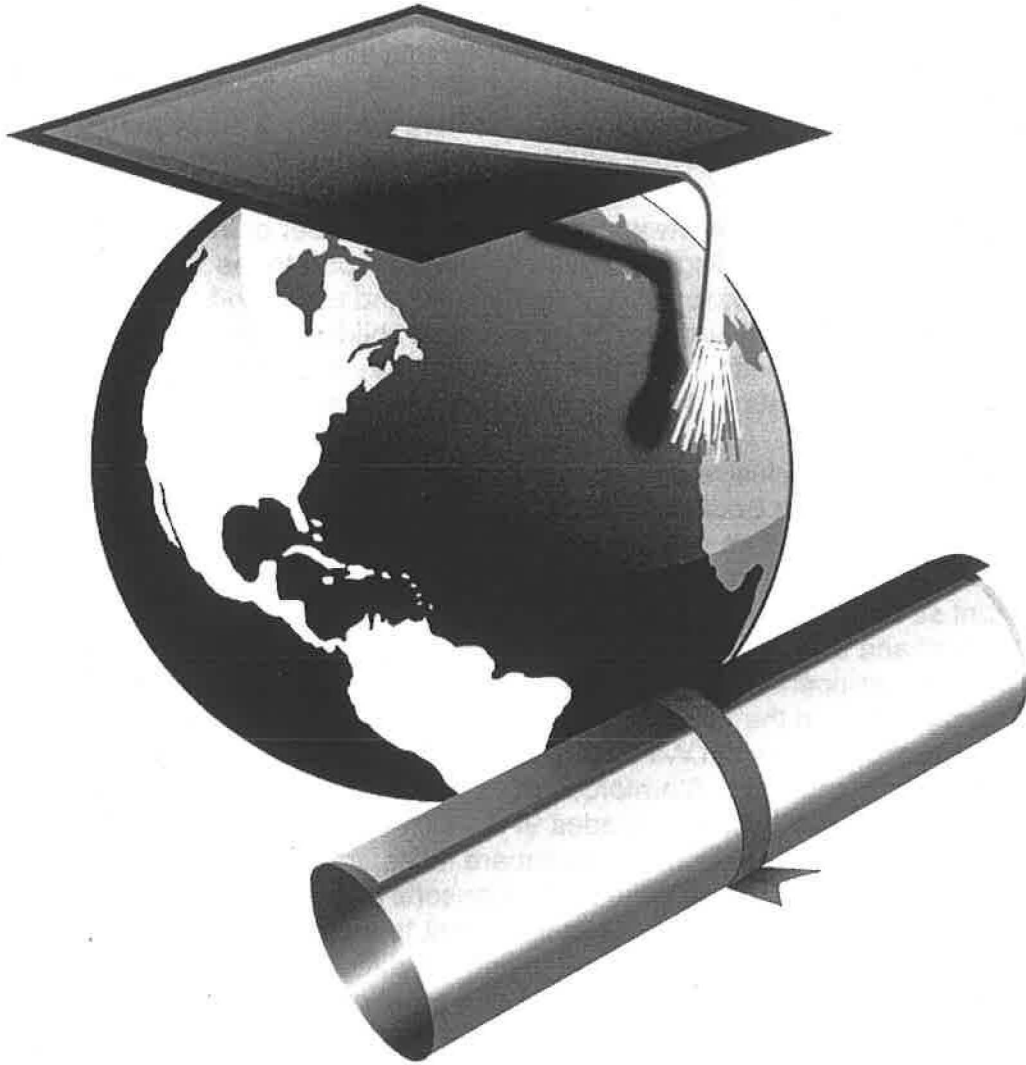
The second side of this side-by-side model would be the unification of Halifax, Readsboro, and Stamford into the Southern Valley Unified Union School District. These three isolated districts offer PreK–8 education in their local elementary schools and pay tuition for high school students.

To complete the study we are recommending that the Vermont State Board of Education accept the self-study for Searsburg, a non-operating district in the supervisory union, and when approved, Searsburg would be assigned to the WSSU.

This report has provided evidence and data to support the creation of a side by side model and the inclusion of Searsburg as an alternative model. Thank you for accepting our report and we look forward to our presentation to the board in April. As stated earlier, both Act 46 Study Committees understand that unification may not solve the fiscal challenges caused by decreasing enrollments in the districts, but will give them a greater capacity to help address the problems created by these issues.

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Many different factors contribute to the wide range of educational choices made by Searsburg families. Some factors include but are not limited to: Geography and travel distance, winter travel difficulties, the location of parents' jobs, academic opportunities, extracurricular and afterschool programs offered, sports programs, music and arts programs and internships with job placement opportunities. Searsburg pays the announced tuition rate for all public schools and the Vermont State average to all private schools, or the entire private school tuition, whichever is less. Parents and families are able to make the choice taking into account each individual student's strengths, needs and interests with the full support of an actively involved school board. Thus allowing students to meet and exceed the Educational Quality Standard in whichever environment is best suited for the individual.

3. Act 46 Research and Cooperation with other districts

- a. From the first time Searsburg heard mention of Act 156 the board gave it full attention. Early in the process after a few months of seeking information and answers to questions regarding our possible options to move forward we held an informational meeting for our town. On October 29, 2015, 20 voters attended out of 109 registered voters in the town. The board presented 3 possible options to the town. 1. Merge with the three similarly operating districts within the WSSU that had elementary schools but high school choice. 2. Merge with Twin Valley who operates schools for Pre-K through 12. 3. Seek out other non-operating district outside of the WSSU. All audience members supported, by show of hands support to seek out another "like" districts in the interest of keeping the current Pre-K through 12 choice. Approximately half of the meetings attendees supporting choice did not have a current student enrolled or would not have a current student enrolled by 2017. Further discussion included
- b. Searsburg first approached Stratton, another non-operating school district of similar size within the Windham Central Supervisory Union at a regular Stratton Board meeting on October 1, 2015. The Searsburg Board Chair Jacki Murano with support from Searsburg State Representative Laura Sibilis both spoke to the Stratton Board suggesting that Searsburg and Stratton start a discussion about the possibility of merger. Stratton was in the very early stages of processing the ACT 46 information and had been approached by the Winhall School Board as well. At that time Stratton had no further interest.
- c. Searsburg subsequently joined a Study Committee of non-operators from the school districts of Granville, Hancock and Pittsfield in November of 2015. While the logistics became an instantly daunting feat because of distance between Searsburg and the three other boards, Searsburg continued with the study. In the end the Searsburg School Board concluded that there was no benefit to our town or students and in fact the distance would make a merger difficult. The board also concluded that having a Supervisory office in close proximity for support and accountability was a priority not met by the proposed merger. With the intent to be fully informed Searsburg continued to monitor and attend the Southern Valley Study committee meetings during this time. Searsburg also considered the possibility of merging with Somerset, which shares a border. The Searsburg School board was informed that a merger with Somerset was not possible as Somerset was an "unincorporated town" and not eligible.
- d. In April of 2016, Searsburg was contacted by the Marty Nadler, Chair of the Winhall School Board. He proposed that Searsburg enter into a formal study committee with Searsburg, Stratton, Winhall and Sandgate to form a RED within the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union. The Searsburg School district discussed this possible merger at great length with the WSSU Superintendent, The Stratton School District, The BRSU Superintendent and both the Searsburg State Representative Laura Sibilis and the Stratton/Winhall State Representative Oliver Olsen. With some reluctance and concern that the voters of Searsburg would not approve such a merger Searsburg agreed to participate in the hopes that there would be unforeseen benefits to such a merger. By August of 2016 The Searsburg board was concerned that a meeting had not been set up for the first RED meeting within the BRSU. Searsburg began to seek out information from the BRSU to have a preliminary idea of what a merger would mean for Searsburg. Searsburg requests for information were denied under the pretense that the information would be shared once the committee began their study. This response only amplified Searsburg concerns over joining with a much larger SU that we had no previous relationship with.

Conclusion

The comprehensive study and report of the Twin Valley Act 46 Study Committee and the Southern Valley Act 46 Study Committee including Halifax, Readsboro, Stamford, Wilmington, Whitingham, and Searsburg has demonstrated a practical and reasonable plan that will best meet the needs of all students in the six participating districts.

The plan you have reviewed is inclusive and does not leave any districts in the WSSU isolated. There were many discussions with districts outside the supervisory union during this process but none seemed to meet the needs of participating communities or the students in those communities.

The Twin Valley Act 46 Plan has proposed the unification of Wilmington and Whitingham, which currently contract to operate schools jointly. This appears to be a next logical step in bringing these two communities together and sharing fiscal responsibility for all children in the two communities. They would be the first side of a side by side model.

The second side of this side-by-side model would be the unification of Halifax, Readsboro, and Stamford into the Southern Valley Unified Union School District. These three isolated districts offer PreK–8 education in their local elementary schools and pay tuition for high school students.

To complete the study we are recommending that the Vermont State Board of Education accept the self-study for Searsburg, a non-operating district in the supervisory union, and when approved, Searsburg would be assigned to the WSSU.

This report has provided evidence and data to support the creation of a side by side model and the inclusion of Searsburg as an alternative model. Thank you for accepting our report and we look forward to our presentation to the board in April. As stated earlier, both Act 46 Study Committees understand that unification may not solve the fiscal challenges caused by decreasing enrollments in the districts, but will give them a greater capacity to help address the problems created by these issues.

