

Testimony of Vincent Illuzzi
Vermont State Board of Education
June 27, 2018, Lake Morey Inn, Fairlee, Vermont

Madam Chair And Members of the Board:

My name is Vincent Illuzzi and I live in Derby, Vermont. For over three decades, I represented the Essex/Orleans Senate District in the Vermont Senate. Our corner of Vermont is characterized by exceptional natural beauty, rich wildlife, a harsh climate, sparse population and widespread poverty.

Act 49 was a recognition that Act 46 was too much of a "one size fits all" type of top down mandate that failed to account for a large number of local situations. It was an attempt to allow a little more flexibility and to answer some of the loudest complaints. It allowed the Act 46 tax incentives to go to proposed mergers where some of the members of the supervisory union retained their current governance structure. This is what the General Assembly stated as its explanation:

"(e) Significant areas of the State, however, have experienced difficulty satisfying the goals of Act 46. The range of complications is varied, including operating or tuitioning models that differ among adjoining districts, geographic isolation due to lengthy driving times or inhospitable travel routes between proposed merger partners, and greatly differing levels of debt per equalized pupil between districts involved in merger study committees."

In my opinion, Act 49 simply didn't go far enough in terms of flexibility because neither the Agency of Education nor the General Assembly can be as closely in touch with the needs of many communities as the people who live there. It is wrong to assume small towns want to do the wrong thing. They want to do what is best for their children. In fact, it is my understanding that Act 46 was so tightly written only four districts could take advantage of it.

The weighting study that is a critical piece of the decision making in this process has not been completed yet. At a minimum this Board should hit the pause button until that study is completed. But I also believe there are some critical questions that should be returned for consideration by the General Assembly.

I would ask that this Board request that the 2019 General Assembly further refine the goals set forth in Act 46 as modified by Act 49, to continue to fine tune the law to

achieve the best possible outcome for the remaining communities that have small schools.

Let me explain why:

Background: Small Schools In A Relatively Poor Area With Long Distances To Travel

In the Essex/Orleans District the percentage of students on free and reduced lunches ranges from 60% in one of the state's property rich towns to 85% in one of the state's property poor towns.

There are 41 towns in the Essex/Orleans Senate District, spanning from Richford in Franklin County to Canaan, where Quebec and Canada join Vermont and New Hampshire in the very northeast corner of the state, down to Concord and then over to Wolcott in Lamoille County. With the exception of North Country and Lake Region Union High Schools, almost every other school is considered small. Small and very efficiently run. Many have relatively long bus routes over rough, unpaved roads, which are snowy and icy in the winter.

Schools Are The Heart Of The Communities And Extensions of Our Families

The towns in the Essex/Orleans Senate District have few of the amenities of a Burlington, a Norwich or a Manchester. But what our towns and the families who live there do have is schools, especially our elementary schools, which are the heart of our communities. In fact, our schools are not just the heart of our communities; they are extensions of our families. These small, rural schools don't just teach our children. They take care of our children. These districts have a relatively high percentage of children with behavioral issues and special needs. A significant percentage have been traumatized. Importantly, all the academic literature supports this conclusion -- children from disadvantaged families are best served by small schools like the ones that remain in Vermont.

Equalizing Education

After the Vermont Supreme Court rendered its *Brigham v. State* decision, the 1997 General Assembly undertook the task of equalizing funding available to Vermont students. It was an important step forward for the Northeast Kingdom. And a part of that task became a recognition that schools in communities like Island Pond, Lowell and Canaan did not have the economies of scale as did schools in South Burlington, Rutland and Essex. What we did have was a far more challenging demographic and a

The purpose of small schools grants in Act 60 and the metrics required by Act 46 and Act 49 are at odds. The General Assembly needs to clarify its intent, and again address the changed landscape. Without some harmonizing, Act 60 and Act 46 are on a collision course on the issue of small schools grants and the equal distribution of revenues—especially given the continuance of these grants, albeit now called “merger support grants,” to small schools that have merged.

As things now stand, the conflict will inevitably go to court, especially since the small schools grants are being guaranteed to those small schools that have merged. I submit the courts will send this issue back to the General Assembly if this Board does not do so.

I urge this Board to send this issue back to the General Assembly for further consideration.

Economic Development And Education Policy Go Hand In Hand.

It is both impossible and I suggest foolish to divide educational and economic policies. They go hand in hand.

The individuals the state seeks to attract would love to move to a rural area, but they won't do so if there are not good schools available. Economic development in rural areas depends on good schools.

Today, Gov. Scott and the General Assembly are justifiably concerned about our “greying” demographic. The 2018 General Assembly, at Governor Scott’s request, will as part of the Fiscal Year 2019 Budget enact a program to give a \$10,000 grant to a person who is employed full-time by an out-of-state employer, working remotely from a new home, and becoming a Vermont resident. The goal is to bring young entrepreneurs and telecommuters, and their children, to Vermont.

The digital revolution holds enormous prospects for communities that can offer pristine landscapes, clean water, rich wildlife and a healthy outdoor recreation to young people with children who don't need to live in a concrete jungle to make a living.

We have all of the natural and recreational resources to be a magnet for these new entrepreneurs, but in the Northeast Kingdom, our schools are critical to that future. The young families we hope and need to attract will not move to any place that puts their young children on a bus for two or three hours a day, leaving in the darkness of the morning and perhaps returning in the darkness of the night.

If we create public policies that take elementary schools away from the small rural communities, then Essex County, Vermont and Orleans County, Vermont will begin, more and more, to resemble Gilmer County, West Virginia. That county has been losing population since 1940.

Hit The Pause Button To Obtain Updated Information And Request The General Assembly Reconsider Acts 46 and 49

A weighting study will be undertaken. I respectfully request that the State Board of Education wait for the results of that study to create updated, fair metrics, given the small school landscape as it exists today.

In the meantime, I urge you to hit the pause button. By doing so, you will allow those small schools that are still standing to live another day until the policy enacted three years ago, in Act 46 of 2015, are reconsidered and perhaps updated.

Act 46 of 2015 clearly stated in Section 3(a):

“It is not the State’s intent to close schools and nothing in this act shall be construed to require, encourage, or contemplate the closure of schools in Vermont.”

As the policies are playing out, three years into Act 46, that is exactly what will happen to the remaining small schools.

Report To The 2019 General Assembly

I urge you to report to the 2019 General Assembly that Acts 46 and 49 have gone a long way in achieving the goal of consolidating small schools, but that the small schools that remain have set forth good reason to not do so. I urge you to request the General Assembly consider the reasons given by the remaining small schools and then update and refine certain aspects of Acts 46 and 49.

Your Actions Today Will Forever Impact These Communities

The heart and soul of countless communities is at stake with your decision. It serves no purpose to subject those communities to what will be viewed by them as permanent damage in the name of efficiency. What we do now will echo through generations.

Substantial Deference To Communities That Have Walked Away From Tax Incentives

Of the school districts that already have consolidated, it probably made sense for them to do so. The remaining small schools that have not consolidated have carefully considered their options and have articulated good reasons why it doesn't make sense for them to do so.

I urge you to give substantial deference to those alternative governance structure proposals that have been submitted by communities that, after careful study and consideration, chose to walk away from the tax incentives of Act 46 and not consolidate.

In closing, I request this Board consider the following:

1. give substantial deference to the alternative governance structures proposed by those remaining small school districts;
2. wait for the results of the weighting study before making critical decisions concerning small schools grants;
3. recommend that the 2019 General Assembly reconsider certain provisions in Act 46 that have the effect of causing small schools to close; and
4. preserve small school grants pending further study by this Board and the 2019 General Assembly.

I request the Board also consider the following cost saving measures:

5. a statewide budget for special education;
6. consolidation of more supervisory unions to reduce redundancy in administrative overhead
7. initiatives to encourage more cooperative agreements between small schools.

Conclusion

In 1818, the State of New Hampshire attempted to make Dartmouth College a state institution under the control of the New Hampshire governor. The college resisted and Daniel Webster, a Dartmouth graduate, argued the college's case before the U.S. Supreme Court. One view is that Webster's speech in support of Dartmouth (which he described as "a small college," adding, "and yet there are those who love it") was so moving that it apparently helped convince Chief Justice John Marshall that the school should remain as it was.

I wish I had Daniel Webster's eloquence. I don't. But these are small schools with many who love them and they serve children well.

I urge you to tread carefully when you have their future in your hands.

Thank you.

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