

**REPORT TO THE
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION AND STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
FROM THE BOARD OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS
TOWN OF SHARON**

**PROPOSAL FOR “ALTERNATIVE
STRUCTURE”
UNDER ACT 46, Section 9**

**Sharon School Board
December 22, 2017**

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

The Sharon School District, with the support of the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU), proposes to the Secretary of Education and the State Board of Education that the Sharon School District, continuing as part of the WRVSU and its several new unified union school districts, be considered to be an “alternative structure” under Act 46.

The Sharon School District has met the requirements for “self-evaluation, meetings, and proposal” through its extensive work within the White River Valley Supervisory Union, through a 706 Study Committee, as well as through collaborative explorations with neighboring districts in other Supervisory Unions, and through the work involved in preparing this report.

This proposal is made based on the following considerations:

- 1. Sharon has been heavily engaged in addressing education governance issues throughout the White River Valley and meets all of the expectations around “meetings”.** Sharon has been an active participant in the creation of the White River Valley Supervisory Union and in detailed analysis of Act 46 options, including full involvement in a 706 study committee. The chair of the Sharon School Board has served as chair of the WRVSU Board over the past 4 years of work on restructuring education governance in the region. This work has resulted in the creation of a strong supervisory union and has provided for a thorough analysis of options under Act 46. It has resulted in the decision that an “alternative structure” is necessary and desirable in this circumstance.
- 2. Sharon is structurally and geographically isolated from other districts that have a similar education delivery structure.** Over the past two years, substantial changes have been made in the structure of education governance both within the WRVSU and in neighboring districts and supervisory unions, making clearer the long-term governance options available to the Sharon School District. Sharon needs to remain a free-standing district in the context of the WRVSU in order to retain its current operating structure and to continue to benefit from its membership in the WRVSU in achieving the goals of Act 46. There are no reasonable options.
- 3. Sharon’s current situation, compared to many districts in Vermont, is strong relative to the goals of Act 46. The best way to sustain and improve its performance will be to remain a freestanding district within the context of the WRVSU.** Extensive work has gone into creating and developing a strong supervisory union. Sharon is in a good position to continue that work along with the several new unified union districts that will be forming on July 1, 2018.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SHARON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Sharon is a small Vermont town, population 1,502, located on the White River upstream from Hartford and downstream from Royalton. Its citizens are engaged in work, professional services, and commerce in the Upper Valley area (Hartford, Lebanon, Hanover), and to a lesser degree, in Royalton, Bethel, and Randolph. Socio-economically, Sharon, on the whole, can be described as somewhat more affluent than the average Vermont community. School children, however, tend to be slightly less affluent than the average.

Income (July 1, 2017)		
	Town of Sharon	State of Vermont
Median Household Income	\$59,078	\$58,578
Average Household Income	\$80,412	\$75,631
Per Capita Income	\$33,470	\$31,498

Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price School Meals			
Bethel	51%	Royalton	48%
Chelsea	51%	Sharon	50%
Granville	N/A	Stockbridge	46%
Hancock	N/A	Strafford	40%
Rochester	54%	Tunbridge	53%
Statewide Average		44%	
Source: AOE School Nutrition Report			

Sharon's student population has defied patterns that are common in Vermont with modest growth in the ADM count. Below is a graph showing ADM growth in the context of other districts in the WRVSU.

ADM Counts Used in Calculating Equalized Pupils					
	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017
Bethel	266.41	269.77	288.03	286.03	275.49
Chelsea	136.26	146.73	165.87	170.30	177.00
Granville	32.06	22.00	23.00	28.80	36.00
Hancock	36.04	37.50	47.05	45.00	54.35
Rochester	99.00	100.74	105.80	111.00	95.40
Royalton	321.76	303.29	313.00	332.25	349.85
Sharon	220.85	250.45	256.83	260.50	261.90
Stockbridge	96.70	96.00	101.00	103.00	90.70
Strafford	169.75	177.20	171.25	184.80	176.60
Tunbridge	176.15	181.13	183.00	171.13	173.00
Totals	1,554.98	1584.81	1654.83	1692.81	1690.29

Source: AOE Data Set 10/19/16

Sharon has long been part of a supervisory union involving Royalton and several other small towns to the north. In 2015, the State Board required that supervisory union to merge with its neighbor to the north, forming the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU). The Sharon School Board has played an active role in the emergence of that new entity. Don Shaw, chair of the Sharon School Board, has been the chair of his SU for the past 19 years, the past two years, he has served as chair of the new WRVSU Board. Sharon has been fortunate to have had only two different superintendents in recent years. Most recently, Bruce Labs is currently serving in his fourth year as superintendent .

The Sharon Elementary School provides a PK program to children from the region. Most importantly, it serves Sharon students in grades PK-6. Occasionally, it serves a K-6 tuition student, but that has been an exception. Enrollment at Sharon Elementary School in 2016 was 164. The district has been blessed with consistent leadership. Barrett Williams has served as Principal for the past 10 years. During that period, only two teachers have turned over, both due to retirements.

As the supervisory union has developed, the Sharon principal has become an active member of the administrative team and seeks out opportunities for collaboration with his peers.

All of Sharon’s students in grades 7-12 are tuitioned to public and independent schools in the region. Sharon has tuitioned its students for many years. Below is a table showing the schools attended by Sharon students over the past five years:

Sharon Students Tuitioned for Grades 7-12					
FY'13-FY'17					
School	FY'13	FY'14	FY'15	FY'16	FY'17
Carabassett Valley Academy					1
Chelsea			1		
Dresden (Norwich/Hanover)	5	5	4	5	5
Hartford	22	22	19	20	19
Hyde School	1				
Lyndon Institute				1	
Royalton	17	11	12	11	9
Sharon Academy	49	54	54	56	53
Strafford	1		1	2	1
Thetford Academy	6	3	2	4	6
Upper Valley Waldorf School		1	2		1
Valley Forge Military Academy	1				
Woodstock UHSD #4	3	3	4	2	1

It is important to note that the majority of secondary students are educated at an independent school, The Sharon Academy, located within the Town of Sharon. The Sharon Academy opened in 1996 and now serves approximately 160 students in grades 7-12. In FY 2016, 108 students from five “choice towns” in the WRV SU were tuitioned to The Sharon Academy, 56 of them from the Sharon School District.

MEETING THE REQUIREMENT FOR “MEETINGS”

The Sharon School District has been an active participant in all of the education governance activities of the past three years within the White River Valley Supervisory Union. In fact, during this entire period, Don Shaw, chair of the Sharon School Board, has been the chair of the WRV SU. All of the activities of the WRV SU have been thoroughly chronicled by the Vermont State Board of Education in that each of these steps has been approved by the State Board. In addition, Sharon has explored possible connections with other communities and supervisory unions. Sharon has fully met its obligations for “meetings” and “regional conversations”. The four separate actions to meet with others and consider governance changes are listed below:

1. Supervisory Union Merger 2014-2015

In the summer of 2014, the State Board of Education strongly urged the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Unions to consider a merger. Over the next six months, those two supervisory union boards worked hard to develop a merger plan which was presented to the State Board in January 2015. At that meeting, the State Board ordered the creation of the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU), effective July 1, 2016. The new SU was comprised of ten separate school districts. The chair of the joint committee creating this new supervisory union was Don Shaw, chair of the Sharon School District. *The study that supported that action of the board can be found in the State Board's record of its January, 2015 meeting.* * For 18 months, a Transition Board, chaired by Mr. Shaw, oversaw the creation of the new SU, including work on a strategic plan, facilitated by the International Center for Leadership in Education. The WRVSU officially came into being on July 1, 2016.

2. Act 46 Exploration – WRVSU Leadership and Governance Committee 2015-2016

Soon after the State Board ordered creation of the WRVSU, the General Assembly passed Act 46. The new law prompted these same districts to then explore possible ways to reduce the number of districts within the supervisory union. A Leadership and Governance Committee was created, again chaired by Mr. Shaw of Sharon. That committee held a number of warned meetings between November, 2015 and February 2016 and fully explored a wide range of approaches to meeting the requirements of Act 46. *A report of the results of the Leadership and Governance Committee was attached to the proposal submitted to the State Board of Education at its meeting in February, 2017, and is available to the Secretary and the State Board as it considers this request.* * The key outcome was a decision to create three separate 706 study committees which would explore the creation of three different school districts within the SU:

PK-12 Operating

PK-6 or PK-8 Operating, with tuitioning of students thereafter

Non-Operating

All three subcommittees were created and began meeting in the summer of 2016

3. PK6/8 Operating Study Committee 2016-2017

Sharon has been an active player in the PK-6/8 Operating Study Committee. In the fall of 2016, there were numerous meetings of a group involving Sharon, Stockbridge, Strafford, and Tunbridge. The outcome of that group was that Chelsea and Tunbridge chose to move forward a proposal to create a union district that operated grades PK-8 and tuitioned students in grades 9-12. The other participants, including Sharon, chose not to alter their historic operating/tuitioning patterns, and there were substantial logistical barriers to a Sharon/Stockbridge merger. (These will be discussed later in this report). *The full "side-by-side" proposal considered by the State Board at its February 2017 meeting described those*

challenges. That report is part of the record as the Secretary and State Board consider this request.*

4. Exploration with other Districts and Supervisory Unions 2015-2017

In addition, Sharon has participated in exploring two other options with surrounding towns outside of the context of WRVSU's efforts. The first involved exploring creation of a new supervisory union with Thetford, Strafford, and Norwich. Those meetings began in the fall of 2015 and culminated around April 2016. A number of models were explored, all of which would have required that one or more districts change their governing structure. In the end, Norwich decided to pull out of the talks because of its complicated interstate compact with Hanover. The second involved exploring formation of a supervisory union with Thetford, Strafford, Tunbridge. This process occurred simultaneous with the WRVSU PK-6/8 group. In the end, a consultant provided a financial analysis of the model which revealed that such a plan would cost two-three times more than the current system.

The key point here is that the Sharon School District has aggressively explored a range of options and has been a helpful and active participant in various publicly-warned planning processes within the region. The Sharon School Board has come to the conclusion that designation as an "alternative structure" is the only viable path forward.

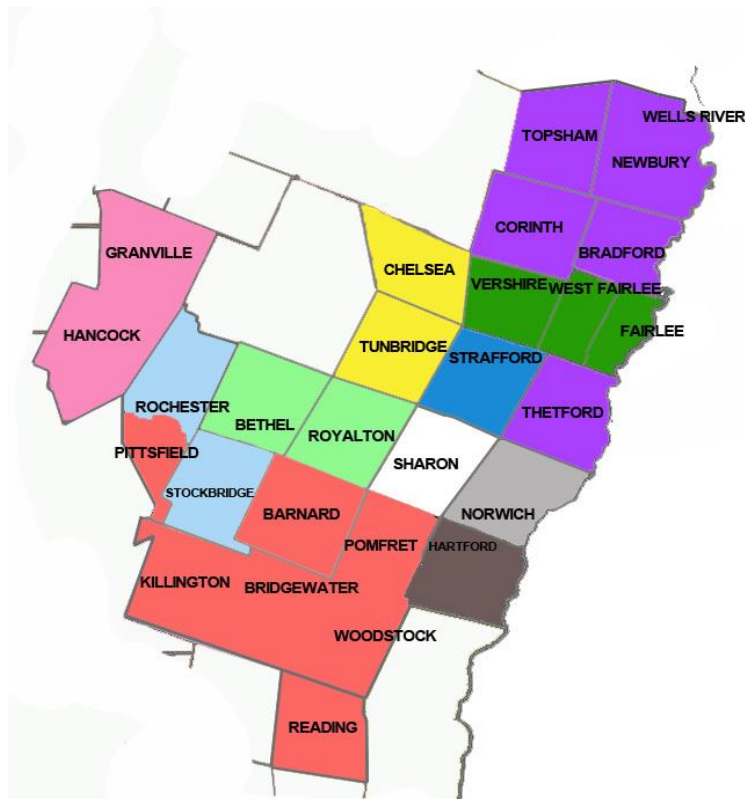
ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL OPTIONS THAT DO NOT COMPROMISE THE PROTECTIONS OF SECTION 4

Act 46 states the following:

If it is not possible or practicable to develop a proposal that realigns some districts, where necessary, into an Education District in a manner that adheres to the protections of Sec. 4 of this act (protection for tuition-paying and operating districts) or that otherwise meets all aspects of Sec. 5(b), then the proposal may also include alternative governance structures as necessary such as a supervisory union with member districts . . .

Sharon is a school district that values its current model of operating a school for grades K-6, and tuitioning thereafter. Act 46 is strong in its protection of that right. Sharon has devoted considerable time and energy to analyzing the options that would protect that structure and improve its ability to achieve the goals of Act 46. During these past two years, a number of mergers have occurred involving neighboring towns which clarify the status of possible partners for Sharon, leading to the conclusion that an "alternative structure" is necessary. Sharon is geographically isolated from any possible partners.

Below is a map of the region:



What it shows is the following:

✓ *The following districts have been or are being created within the WRVSU, none of which are viable for Sharon—*

- *White River Unified School District (Bethel-Royalton) PK-12 Operating*

This district has been approved and certified, to be effective 7/1/18.

This district has a structure different from that of Sharon.

- *First Branch Unified School District (Chelsea-Tunbridge) PK-8 Operating, 9-12 Choice*

This district was approved by voters on 11/7/17, for implementation on 7/1/18, but a reconsideration vote has been petitioned for. A follow up vote will occur in January. Regardless of the outcome of these votes, Sharon has a structure that differs from that of the proposed new district and that of the current districts.

- *Granville-Hancock Unified School District* *Non-Operating*

This district has been approved by voters, and certified, to be effective 7/1/18.

This district has a structure different from that of Sharon

- *Rochester-Stockbridge Unified District* *PK-6 Operating, 7-12 Choice*

This district was approved by voters on 11/28/17. The vote cannot be certified until passage of the 30-day reconsideration period. Assuming that there are no reconsideration appeals, the district will come into being on 7/1/18.

This new district has the same structure as Sharon. However, there are substantial reasons that Sharon should not be merged into the new Rochester-Stockbridge District. Rochester and Stockbridge are two communities isolated in the upper White River Valley. They have chosen to merge because they are contiguous communities located along the upper White River Valley. Their schools are 11 miles apart. They already have a number of joint efforts and can find operational and efficiency connections. They are close enough and similar enough to share leadership and programming. Their citizens will be able to engage with the new district and identify with and support the schools. Sharon is geographically separated from this new district. Its primary commercial and social links are with the Upper Valley and with Royalton. The Sharon Elementary School is 19 miles from the Stockbridge Central School and 25 miles from the Rochester School (with a mountain in between). There are places in Rochester that are 35 miles from Sharon. The distances and geography preclude serious collaborative venture for elementary students and make very difficult the notion of community engagement in a merged district between the three communities.

- ✓ *Strafford* *PK-8 Operating* *Grades 9-12 Designation of Thetford Academy*

Strafford is also seeking status as an alternative structure. It has a unique operating structure that it desires to maintain. It operates grades PK-8 and designates Thetford Academy as its high school. Sharon does not desire to operate grades 7-8 nor does it want to designate Thetford Academy as the high school for its students.

- ✓ *Rivendell Interstate District* *PK-12 Operating*

Rivendell is an interstate district which covers the towns of Vershire, Fairlee, and Orford, New Hampshire. Not only does it operate schools for grades PK-12, but as an interstate district, it cannot be required to accept a new member. It is not an option for Sharon.

- ✓ *Thetford* *Operates PK-6* *Grades 7-12 Designation to Thetford Academy*

Thetford has a unique structure that is deeply rooted in the history of education in that town. Thetford Academy is a quasi-public private academy which is the designated secondary school for all Thetford residents. Sharon enjoys total choice of high schools, with many students attending Sharon Academy, a private independent school. There is no desire to send all students to Thetford Academy.

- ✓ *Norwich* *Part of the Interstate SAU #70* *PK-12 Operating*

Norwich is part of an interstate school district, involving Hanover, New Hampshire. As such, it is exempt from the state plan. Through its connection with Hanover and the Dresden School District, it operates PK-12 programs which is a different structure from that of Sharon. As such, this is not an option for Sharon.

- ✓ *Barnard and Pomfret* *Parts of the Windsor Central MUUD* *PK-12 Operating*

Barnard and Pomfret are both part of the Windsor Central Modified Unified Union School District. High School students in both districts attend Woodstock Union High School. Pomfret is a full member of the new unified school district. Barnard has not, thus far, joined its elementary school to the unified district, but continues to be yoked to Woodstock Union High School. Because the structure of these districts does not match that of Sharon, there is no possibility of a merger for Sharon.

Sharon is currently geographically and structurally isolated from possible merger partners. An “alternative structure” with Sharon remaining an independent district within the WRVSU is the most logical plan going forward.

SELF-ANALYSIS OF SHARON’S ABILITY TO FULFILL THE GOALS OF ACT 46

Sustaining and Improving Education Quality, Opportunity, and Equity

PreK

The Sharon School District operates a robust Pre-Kindergarten program, serving 40 children from Sharon and the broader region. It serves students 14.5 hours/week and can include aftercare.

Secondary Education

The Sharon School District has, for many years, tuitioned students for grades 7-12 and is pleased with the experience and the results. It has no interest in changing that practice. Schools most frequently attended are identified earlier in this report. Students, regardless of socio-economic status are able to attend excellent public schools and a very strong private independent school. The Royalton Schools and Hartford High School both provide a bus to facilitate access. The Sharon Academy is located in the center of Sharon and is easily accessible to all.

Elementary Education

Sharon Elementary School provides an excellent K-6 education program:

Core academic course instruction is provided for all students in grades K-6.

“Specials” include:

- Art - 30 minute classes 2x per week
- Music - 30 minutes 2x per week
- PE - 30 minutes 2x per week
- Library - 30 minutes 2x per week
- Math enrichment - 30 minutes 1x per week
- Guidance - 30 minutes 1x per week

Other special features of the program include:

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| K-6 Advisory Groups | Enrichment Block |
| Jr. Iron Chef | FEED |
| Spelling B | Chess Club |
| Sprouts | Town Recreation Sports Program |
| Reading Mentors | TSA Student Mentors |

Sharon is particularly proud of its food education and health and wellness programs. Highlights have been participation in the Junior Iron Chef program and convening of a Farm and Field Day. The latter has been attended by many other schools within the supervisory union.

Sharon is a small school with small cohorts being tested on standardized tests. Nonetheless, data available through the AOE shows that in four of seven testing areas, Sharon scores exceeded the state average, in some instances dramatically. In two areas Sharon scored the same as the state average, and in one grouping, the average statewide average exceeded that of Sharon students. Overall, one can conclude that Sharon performs reasonably well compared with other districts in the state. The chart of scores can be found below:

Student Assessment Information					
Test	Grade Level	Sharon School District		State of Vermont	
		Above Proficiency	Below Proficiency	Above Proficiency	Below Proficiency
SB English/Language Arts (2017)					
	4	64%	35%	49%	50%
	5	41%	58%	55%	44%
	6	52%	47%	52%	47%
SB Math (2017)					
	4	47%	52%	47%	52%
	5	52%	47%	42%	57%
	6	42%	57%	38%	61%
NECAP Science (2014)					
	4	85%	14%	48%	51%

Having said this, there are opportunities for improvement through collaboration with other WRVSU districts. Sharon Elementary School is anxious to collaborate to bring world languages into the curriculum, as well as to be able to combine part-time positions with others in the SU to be able to hire teachers as full-time employees. Sharon will continue to work with the WRVSU and its member districts to expand student opportunity and reduce disparity.

Special Education

Special Education services are delivered through the WRVSU. Although the number of students identified for special education is slightly higher than the statewide average— 17.48% to 15.91%, the amount spent on special education per capita in the SU is less than the statewide average—\$3,418.07 to \$3,562.58.

Achieving Efficiency and Sustainability

One of the factors leading to Act 46 has been the need for school districts to achieve greater efficiencies. Sharon will continue to work within the WRVSU to find those opportunities. However, Sharon currently has a number of favorable indicators relative to efficiency and sustainability.

One of the drivers of high per-pupil costs is low student-teacher ratios. Act 46 specifically identifies the expectation that districts will act to increase those ratios. As can be seen from the table below, Sharon’s ratios are already favorable in the areas that matter most, particularly in the student-teacher ratio which is 24% better than the state average.

Staffing Ratios FY '17		
	Sharon	Statewide (for similar-sized districts)
Student:Teacher	1 to 14.55	1 to 11.69
Student:Administrator	1 to 147	1 to 141.77
Teacher:Administrator	1 to 10.1	1 to 12.13

Perhaps the most important indicator of efficiency is education spending per equalized pupil. Sharon, despite its small size has maintained per-pupil spending at approximately the statewide average, without the benefit of any phantom students. In the past three years, it has not had the benefit of a small schools grant.

Cost Per Equalized Pupil					
	FY'13	FY'14	FY'15	FY'16	FY'17
Education Spending	\$ 3,051,305	\$ 3,230,400	\$ 4,132,466	\$ 4,231,922	\$ 4,382,065
Equalized Pupils	219.49	233.41	243.79	245.69	251.79
Phantom Students	0	0	0	0	0
Small Schools Grant	\$ 59,232	\$ 38,372	\$16,843	0	0
Cost Per Equalized Pupil	\$ 13,902	\$ 13,840	\$ 14,102	\$ 14,689	\$ 14,890
Statewide Cost Per Equalized Pupil	\$ 12,789	\$ 13,546	\$ 14,009	\$ 14,421	\$ 14,652

The bottom line is that Sharon has reasonable ratios and moderate per student spending. It can continue to improve, but begins from a favorable position.

Sharon will continue to work with the WRVSU and its member districts to find ways to collaborate and achieve greater efficiencies. Sharon currently shares custodial services with Strafford. It aspires to collaborate with others in the WRVSU to jointly hire teachers for various specials and for foreign languages.

Increasing Transparency and Accountability

One of the key goals of Act 46 is to increased transparency and accountability. The White River Valley Supervisory Union currently has 10 school district members—a number not conducive to clear accountability. It is too large and too diffuse for effective management by one superintendent and associated staff and it is too large for individual boards and board members to feel that it is accountable to them. Through the various unifications that will take place effective 7/1/18, the number of governance boards will decrease considerably, improving accountability.

Although the Sharon District is proposing to remain an independent district, it will do so and remain an active member of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. The WRVSU will be altering its structure and representation to reflect a substantial reduction in the number of member districts. Simpler structure will provide more time for the Superintendent and SU staff to be able to focus on students and administration and less on simply attending school board meetings.

The WRVSU has already made major headway in meeting several of the expectations of Act 46:

1. The WRVSU has consolidated all of the statutorily-required functions to the supervisory union and fully complies with 16 VSA § 261a.
2. The WRVSU worked closely with the State Board of Education to form itself from two previous Supervisory Unions, allowing for the reduction of one superintendent position and saving in the neighborhood of \$300,000. It continues to seek cost-savings.
3. The districts of the WRVSU, including Sharon, have shown that they “consider themselves to be collectively responsible for the education of all prekindergarten through grade 12 students residing in the supervisory union” in that they engaged in a year-long strategic planning process with the International Center for Educational Leadership. *The strategic plan was presented to the State Board of Education in the packet of February, 2017, and is available to the board if it desires.** It provides a comprehensive guide for the entire supervisory union to continue to strengthen education for all students throughout the region and reduce disparities among students from different areas of the region.
4. The districts of the WRVSU are well on their way to creating “the smallest number of member school districts practicable, achieved wherever possible by the merger of districts with similar operating and tuitioning patterns.”
5. The combined average daily membership of all member districts in the WRVSU is well above the guideline of 900, in fact, it is over 1600.

SUMMARY

The Sharon School Board hereby asks the Secretary of Education and the State Board of Education to approve an “alternative structure” that would allow Sharon to continue to maintain an independent school board and to continue to operate within the context of the White River Valley Supervisory Union.

Our case is simple:

1. We have taken this assignment very seriously and have explored a wide array of options.
2. We believe that there are no other reasonable partners with whom to merge.
3. Our key indicators of education quality are favorable. We are doing a good job of educating our young people.
4. Our financial indicators are stable-- we have modest growth in student count, higher than average student-teacher ratios, and average expenditures per equalized pupil.
5. We are positioned to continue to work within the Whiter River Valley Supervisory Union to continue our pursuit of the goals of Act 46.

REFERENCED DOCUMENTS*

PREVIOUSLY SUBMITTED TO THE SECRETARY AND THE STATE BOARD

Report on the Proposed Supervisory Union Boundary Change between Windsor Northwest and Orange-Windsor Supervisory Unions

Considered by Vermont State Board of Education January, 2015

WRVSU Strategic Plan: Blueprint for Change 2016-2021

Appendix to Report considered by Vermont State Board of Education February, 2017

WRVSU Act 46 Exploration: Report and Recommendation

Appendix to Report considered by Vermont State Board of Education February, 2017

WRVSU Act 46 Study Committees: Proposal to Create Three “Side-by-Side” School Districts

Considered by Vermont State Board of Education February, 2017