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In our larger political context we are witnessing a catastrophic erosion of faith in our institutions and thus a breakdown in our capacity to accept the legitimacy of their governance. In Vermont we have been mostly immune to this poisonous atmosphere, but signs of change are on the horizon.

The use of euphemism is on the rise - we hear people pretend that merging “school governance structures” will not lead to “merging *schools*” which is somehow not school *closure*. And so when Act 46 Sec. 3(b) says, “it is not the State’s intent to close its small schools...” we have to cynically ask ourselves if the State’s intent is to get unified union boards to do so.

Communities have been told that educational equity is of utmost importance yet the Agency of Education has issued a proposed plan that further consolidates power to the advantaged (whether that be political, financial, geographic, or demographic) at the expense of the disadvantaged.

School districts were given the opportunity to vote on merger proposals only to be told that the results of those votes were to be treated as mere, “community sentiment.” (p. 13 and throughout *Proposed Statewide Plan*) If it were mere sentiment, why did the state require such votes be duly warned? Why not solicit a poll? Why give the appearance of a procedure that would carry legal authority?

Further feeding this atmosphere of distrust, we have the uncanny result that the *Proposed Statewide Plan* has proposed forced mergers for *nearly every proposal* in which there was not a structural or ongoing procedural reason it was not possible. It strains credulity to believe that the process was fair. The adversarial nature of the Acting Secretary’s response to Sec. 9 proposals is clear evidence of this. This stands in stark contrast to the nearly perfunctory approval of merger proposals, many of which were filled with soaring rhetoric about “*expected savings*,” “*anticipated efficiencies*,” and other *proposed* advantages to their plans. AGS proposals appear to have been held to a different standard. Luckily, the SBE will also be held to a different standard than the AOE:

Act 49 Sec. 20

“The State Board may adopt rules designed to assist districts in submitting alternative structure proposals, but **shall not by rule or otherwise impose more stringent requirements than those in this act.**”

Beyond this general dismay at the political climate around educational governance, there are specific issues germane to my town (Barnard) that I would like to address. Throughout this process we have been pleading that the deliberation of our AGS fate not be conducted in the

abstract, but in the concrete context of the actual merger proposal we rejected. The AOE did not do so. They ignored or dismissed the political realities before us.

Most importantly, the AOE dismissed the likelihood that our school would be restructured. This violates the spirit of the law, if not the letter (much like relying on unified boards to close schools). As is clear, the proposed statewide plan itself cannot make changes in the grades Barnard Academy offers:

Act 46 Sec. 4(b) as summarized in AOE Act 46, Sec. 9 Self-Evaluation, Regional Conversations, and Proposals for "Alternative Structures" memo

"The Statewide Plan: shall not include a change that would require a district to change the current grades it operates or tuitions"

Proposed Statewide Plan p.19

"No district is required to change its structure of operating or tuitioning one or more grades, whether through voluntary or mandatory merger, unless the voters of the district choose to do so."

However, the AOE appears to be circumventing this restriction by forcing merger with a district that has expressed precisely this desire to change the grades offered in our school:

Article 15 of WCUUSD proposal

The Study Committee recommends, **as a starting place** for these deliberations, **the restructuring of the Barnard and Reading schools into PK-4 primary schools** ...

The appeal to legal technicalities in this instance - that after (forced) merger this would not be our district changing its operating structure but merely a unified district changing its grade offerings in buildings - only exacerbates the perception that this process does not have the best interests of students, schools, and communities at the center, but some other constituency.

The new unified board has the same members of the study committee that proposed restructuring the school. They have already voted to restructure the Reading school for the coming school year. The Acting Secretary's response to our concerns has been blithe, ignoring this fact. The plan suggests an alliance - "Barnard citizens would have more success obtaining amendments on behalf of small towns if they work with the five other small towns..." - this advice is offered without any real world experience of the *actual* parties involved.

This also ignores that the other small towns want to save their schools and they would put themselves at risk to intervene in the already expressly stated intent and action of the unified district to realize financial savings by cutting class offerings in two communities. Needless to say this creates an immediate concern around equity - singling out students from two towns with less political power that will have to be transported to neighboring towns while other students (merely by happenstance of residence) will not have to undergo this.

It is unfortunate that the *Proposed* Statewide Plan does nothing to quell the fears that the process was not impartial. It is unfortunate that the hundreds of unpaid hours of work by volunteers was cast aside by paid employees. It is unfortunate that the on-the-ground experience of local school boards has been glossed over in favor of procedural platitudes and bureaucratic doublespeak. It is unfortunate, but not surprising. This is a microcosm of this time of transition. This is a "trickle down" approach to education - give every advantage to the already advantaged and somehow everyone will be better off. I want to believe Vermont is better than this.

The SBE has the ability to ensure that we are. In order to do so, you must not myopically focus on the law before you, but all state laws (including Act 60). And you must not focus on the hollow technicality of laws, but on the greater good they are supposed to serve. You have latitude in the execution of the Acting Secretary's proposed plan, and you owe it to posterity to utilize your discretion to restore trust in these fraught times.