

Guilford Central School

John E. Gagnon
Principal

Joann T. Tyler
Administrative Secretary



374 School Road
Guilford, Vermont 05301
(802) 254-2271
Fax: (802) 258-2848
www.guilfordcentralschool.com

Vermont Agency of Education
Secretary Rebecca Holcombe
219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, VT 05641
December 18, 2017

Vermont State Board of Education:

The Guilford Town School Board (GTSB) joined an Act 46 Study Committee with other districts of the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU) in November 2015. The charge of the committee was to look into whether the "preferred" model of consolidation, as outlined in the law, would work for our district. Over a course of two years, the committee, as well as the GTSB, has discussed, considered, and solicited input regarding this charge.

We believe very firmly in the work that has been done to date by our local boards, administration and community, and we have a strong desire to maintain what we have all worked so hard to achieve. Guilford Central School prides itself in its dedication to place-based education and sense of local community - both are values clearly displayed in daily lesson plans and teaching strategies within our school. We are proud of the work done here.

The GTSB is very much aware of the driving forces behind Act 46, and has felt first-hand the impacts of declining enrollment and rising costs on Guilford Central School. We have made tough budget decisions and been forced to limit programming opportunities in an effort to keep costs affordable to our tax payers. We have experienced the fluctuations in annual enrollments and the subsequent effect on our ability to respond to the changing needs of our students while controlling costs. We recognize the necessity for imminent change.

Our biggest challenge is the volatility of our cost per student, and the impact that calculation has on our school offerings and our long term sustainability. The path to compliance with Act 46 for Guilford school must directly address that challenge.

It has been the responsibility of the GTSB over the last two years to determine the best path forward that will: a) keep our school open; b) keep our school successful; c) keep our school culture; d) keep our school affordable; e) comply with the law. We have actively participated in the work of the WSESU Study Committee as they sought to determine if a merger proposal would provide the best solution. Through this work, we have learned of the challenges and opportunities facing our neighbor schools, and of potential benefits gained by taking a more collaborative approach to the education of the students in our Supervisory Union.

Guilford Central School's vision is to create a school that holds high academic standards for all students to become independent, critical thinkers, as well as responsible members of their community. We work to build a learning environment in which every child is known, valued and celebrated. We are dedicated to our children, their families and the Guilford community.

The Articles of Agreement presented by the WSESU Act 46 Study Committee address many of the challenges facing Guilford school - most notably the positive impact on the volatility of our cost per student calculation. Additionally, the Articles provide a framework for sustainable collaboration across all schools within our Supervisory Union, resulting in opportunities for increased educational equity. The paradigm shift that comes with a merger, from contemplating educational issues for Guilford students only, to that of an inclusive approach across all schools within the Supervisory Union, is a large one, but is one we believe will ultimately better serve the children. The GTSB support for the Articles of Agreement at the time they were finalized by the Study Committee was unanimous.

The Articles of Agreement do not come without areas of concern for Guilford. Throughout the process, we have held numerous public informational sessions and community forums. Consistently, the top concerns we heard were around the potential for school closure, the loss of the local school board, and the proportional representation on the district board. We believe these issues, among other issues and influences, resulted in the defeat of the Articles of Agreement when presented to voters in November 2017. Approximately 25% of Guilford registered voters turned out to voice their opinion of the Articles.

Following the results of the vote, the GTSB regrouped to further contemplate our path to compliance. We joined a sub-committee to study the potential for an Alternative Governance Structure (AGS) as a possible solution. While this path was previously examined and discounted by the Study Committee, we heard the voices of members of our community and gave this option further consideration. Following multiple readings of the AGS proposal, and interactive question and answer sessions with the GTSB representative of the AGS sub-committee and other involved community members, we remain unclear as to how this proposal addresses our biggest challenges, or complies with the law. The GTSB recognizes the hard work of the AGS committee to retain local control, and encourages the State Board of Education to consider any plausible solutions to retaining maximum levels of local control while still addressing the challenges facing our school.

The responsibility of the GTSB has remained the same throughout this process – to study the needs of our school and the requirements of Act 46 and to determine the best path forward for Guilford Central School. After substantial investment into this responsibility, and deep contemplation of all options presented to us, the GTSB believes the Articles of Agreement, as presented by the WSESU Act 46 Study Committee, to be the best available solution for sustainability and viability of Guilford Central School, while meeting the requirements of Act 46.

Guilford Town School Board

Beth Bristol, Chair
Emily Hartz, Vice Chair
Angela Johnson, Clerk
Alice Revis

Act 46

Working to Provide The Most Beneficial Path for Guilford's Kids

Act 46 became law in the State of Vermont in 2015 and requires individual school districts to merge into larger unified union districts, unless an alternative model can be shown to be more practical to meet the Act's goals.

This effort are largely a result of ongoing resource and budget constraints across the state, and the challenge of meeting the varied needs of individual schools and towns. Guilford Central School (GCS) faces unique challenges with consistently falling enrollments, a high cost per pupil relative to State averages, and minimal resources that accompany our small town.

As part of the impending consolidation process, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) requested proposals be submitted by December 28, 2017 outlining how respective towns will comply with the goals of Act 46. A Study Committee, including two representatives from Guilford, spent over two years analyzing the nature of the merger, its benefits and costs, and undertook a path to compliance with Act 46. Extensive engagement was undertaken by members of the GCS and other WSESU School Boards, interested citizens, and between the Study Committee and State Education officials. The outcome and recommendations of this study were presented in the *Study Committee Report and Articles of Agreement (the Articles)*.

Despite the outcome of the November 7, 2017 vote across all member towns to adopt *the Articles*, many Guilford citizens continue to believe the Articles reflect a sound pathway for meeting the goals of Act 46—as required—while addressing the ongoing challenges facing Guilford (see below). There remains ongoing work by citizen-led groups to formulate potential alternative structures to meet the goals articulated in Act 46, and the AOE is welcoming any such plans to be submitted to them for consideration. As described by participating community members at the November 20th GCS board meeting, many provisions continue to be developed and some indeed reflect elements already recommended within *the Articles*—specifically as related to governance, equity and opportunity.

In light of the extensive work done by the Study Committee, many Guilford citizens continue to believe *the Articles* provide strong overall guidance for the State to consider in implementing its plans, with specific recommendations to meet Guilford's unique challenges. As such, supportive citizens have signed this letter to:

- 1) outline several core issues and challenges facing Guilford and in particular GCS and its students related to resources and opportunities, and the reality of falling school numbers,
- 2) support the Study Committee's findings regarding the implications and requirements of Act 46, and
- 3) support submission of *the Articles* to the AOE for consideration in the State's implementation plans.

Such an endorsement does not dismiss or imply disagreement with any specific provisions or the overall framework that developing alternative structures may suggest. Alternative plans may be provided to the AOE directly, and their respective recommendations may in fact serve to complement recommendations set forth in *the Articles*. This letter is meant to express support of *the Articles* for the State's consideration to help meet the existing and future needs of Guilford students and citizens, and reflect our understanding of the goals of Act 46.

Per the work of the Study Committee, we understand the following core issues related to Act 46, its implications to Guilford and the schools within WSESU, and the unique challenges faced by Guilford:

- Act 46 is already law. It requires districts to merge, where practical, or prove they meet the law's goals without merging.
 - Guilford does not meet the goals of the law on its own. Our current Supervisory Union can practically form a unified union district. We will be required to merge.
 - The Study Committee's proposal allows our town to have a say in *how* we merge to ensure:
 - Needed resources are provided to programs that do not currently exist for GCS, but could become available only in cooperation with other WSESU schools.
 - The volatility in costs is reduced to meet GCS needs and that of its students, which would be inevitable without the merger.

- School population is declining and costs are increasing.
 - 38% decrease in population from 2003 to 2017.
 - 41% increase in spending from 2003 to 2017.¹
 - The average cost per student at Guilford continues to run higher than State averages.
 - These costs will continue to rise and need to be funded in Guilford.

- Students are not receiving the same access to programming as other students in our Supervisory Union. Programs currently unavailable at GCS that could be made available through the merger include:
 - foreign language,
 - enrichment programming,
 - full-time after-school and summer-school programming,
 - comprehensive sports programming, and
 - daily after-school tutoring.

- This proposal provides the most sustainable model for Guilford. It helps ensure:
 - Resources are provided to our school that currently are not available.
 - Stability in near term tax rates for Guilford residents to support rising school/student costs.
 - Our school will remain open in the near term for our students!

¹ Elementary student statistics from VT Agency of Education

Lynn M. Tobey
Cory Sorensen Staff-Dummerston resident

Renee Baker
Kathy Lapan Brattleboro
DK CTS

Sandra Cutting
Erin Tkaczyk
Emma Hollowell

Jody Hausen
Judy Best
John Mayron (staff)

Sam Schnesky
Mary Ellen Franklin
Daemon Petty
Kathy Smith

Alice Revis
Beth Bristol

Lynn Tobey
Mary H. Bardish Dummerston

Cory Sorensen
Renee Baker
Kathy Lapan (brattleboro)

Sandra Cortes
KELSEY BURNS

Sandra Cutting
ERIN TKACZYK
EMMA HALLOWELL
MIKE ROBERTS

Alexis Moshonets
Jody Hausen
Jennifer Bogert
JOHN GAGNON

Lauren Schnesky
Sam Schnesky
Mary Ellen Franklin
Daemon Petty
Kathy Smith

Alice Revis Board member Guilford
Beth Bristol

Sam E. Coffey

~~Anne Rider~~

Jenny Conathan

JACOB A. LEACH

Barbara A Belcher-Timmons

DAVID SNYDER

Lisa Ford

Sam E. Coffey

~~Anne Rider~~

Jenny Conathan

JACOB A. LEACH

Barbara A Belcher-Timmons

DAVID SNYDER

Lisa Ford

Maggie Wong

Rob HURRICLES
James Keller

Mary K

AK

Maggie Foley

Anne Rider
Peter Welch

Thayer Tomlinson

AMIT SHARMA