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State Board of Education

Senator Jane Kitchel
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
Representative Mitzi Johnson
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

Dear Senator Kitchel and Representative Johnson:

At our regular meeting of October 20, 2015 (?), the state board unanimously (?) endorsed this letter and directed that I convey it to you at the earliest opportunity. I was also directed to stress the urgency of the matter.

This spring, the senate and House passed and the Governor signed Act 46, "An act relating to making amendments to education funding, education spending, and education governance." Clearly, this is a far-reaching law. It fundamentally changes the organizational structure of the state school system, the largest enterprise of Vermont governance. The sweep of this law can only be compared to the 1892 one district per town law, and the union high school movement of the 1950s and 1960s. We face difficult decisions on school funding and efficiency and Act 46 was the legislative response. Now is the time that words must translate into deeds.

Act 46 attempts to balance the wishes of local citizens who are justifiably proud of their schools yet are confronting the sober realities of a much smaller student body that still requires a comprehensive and high quality educational program. Thus, the phase-in of the program is spread over four years and requires local community committees working together. In many cases, the towns have little tradition of cross-town collaboration and, in other cases, geography is an obstacle. In still other locations, the organizational structure and inheritance is not conducive to effective and rapid collaboration. Ultimately, these community committees must develop plans which must be reviewed and approved by the state board, and then be approved by the electorate. For those towns not reaching satisfactory conclusions, the state board must assign these towns and schools to a new district structure.

Needless to say, this will require massive work at all levels. It will be fractious and difficult in some cases. A state assistance capacity is required within the state agency. We understand one staff member has been added for this purpose but we doubt this level is sufficient. Likewise, the state board of education requires a parallel capacity as we are the reviewing and approving body. As every school district in the state is affected, this represents a sizable work load. This must be accomplished while balancing the constraints and dynamics of



each town while also assuring equality, high educational quality, and fairness for all children in the state.

Unfortunately, the state did not provide any staffing for the 64 pages of new requirements set forth in the law. We also call to your attention Chapter 3 of Title 16 which enumerates 15 pages of pre-existing required duties of the state board of education. When the secretary was removed from reporting to the state board, no staffing was provided to the board to carry out these responsibilities. While the agency and secretary have been most supportive of the state board, we are keenly aware of and sympathize with the steady erosion of agency personnel resulting from the continually increasing economic demands placed on state government since 2008. They are over-worked and under-staffed. Thus, the viability of our governance structure is brought into question.

For Act 46 to succeed (and other state board requirements to be accomplished), it is essential that adequate staffing be provided. Without adequate staffing, Act 46 will simply unravel as 140 years of barren history demonstrates.

The state board needs three types of expertise:

- Legal expertise – Local districts are already employing lawyers to assist in developing and presenting local plans. As amply documented in the media, there are already contentious issues surrounding school choice and who works-with-who. We expect a broader array of issues to develop. This would be a GS level ---
- Professional staff assistance – An individual at GS – (level) is required to serve as a facilitator and positive agent and broker. As the process relies on people working together, this may prove to be our most essential person.
- A staff support person GS – (level) is needed for clerical and administrative support to be shared between these two positions.

It is envisioned that the first two positions be established for the four years of Act 46 implementation and such positions would then be re-evaluated. They would be continued in whole or in part as circumstances indicate at that point in time. As the state board has no staff assigned to them, it is envisioned that the staff support position would be continued indefinitely.

The state board has deliberated thoughtfully on these needs and this request over the two (?) years we have operated with the secretary reporting to the Governor. During this time the governance debates increased and resulted in the passage of the law. We unanimously are of the opinion that if this law is to succeed, and pre-existing requirements of the state board are to be met, we must be properly staffed. Further, such staff increments must be added immediately. Accelerated merger requests are being developed and local districts must stage their activities to coincide with town meetings coming up in a matter of months. The state board must be in a position to act quickly and thoughtfully.



Members of the state board and I will be pleased to meet with you at the earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Stephan Morse
Chair, Vermont State Board of Education

Cc Governor Peter Shumlin
Sen. Ann Cummings, Chair, Senate Education Committee
Rep. David Sharpe, Chair, House Education Committee

