

Sept 14, 2017

ITEM P-1

Dear Secretary Holcombe and Members of the State Board of Education:

Families for Education in Vermont represents over 250 parents in Rupert and Pawlet who advocate for increased educational opportunities for our students. We are writing not to oppose the merger of Rupert and Pawlet, but to oppose the continuation of our tuitioning pattern, which works to contravene the goals of Act 46. We are unique in the state and we strongly feel we need the guidance of the State and a unique solution.

16 V.S.A. § 827 allows for the designation of NY Schools and while it also provides access to Vermont schools, it sets a limit on the tuition that can be spent on non-designated schools. Historically this amount has been the non-resident tuition charged by heavily-subsidized New York schools. This year the non-resident tuition charged by the Salem Central School is \$5,495 and the Vermont Average High School Tuition is \$15,480, which constitutes a financial barrier to education in VT. Over time this has created an artificially low tax rate which makes it difficult or impossible for parents to change the situation and increase access to education in Vermont for their children.

This is further borne out through a demographic analysis of Rupert. Data from the American Community Survey from 2016 indicates only 11% of our community is within the typical age of parents, and currently Rupert has only thirty-three 7th – 12th grade students. For every high school student, there are three people over 70. As the State of Vermont initially allowed for the designation of New York Schools, we respectfully ask the State Board now to consider 16 V.S.A. § 827 as a factor that prevents our community from adequately meeting the goals of Act 46.

Our tuitioning pattern developed out of geographic isolation. In the 1930s, students took the train to Granville, New York for high school. In the 50s, Rupert developed a relationship with Salem and the train to Granville was no longer necessary. In the 70s, four-wheel-drive and front-wheel-drive vehicles allowed more frequent and easier travel over Rupert Mountain, and new schools were built--one within a mile of the Rupert town line. Since the 1990s, after building the Mettawee Community School, our own bus routes travel over Rupert Mountain. Currently the village of West Rupert, the most western village in the town of Rupert, is approximately the same distance from the Dorset Elementary School in Dorset as it is from our pre-K–6 Mettawee Community School in West Pawlet. We are no longer geographically isolated, but the tuitioning pattern works to continue that isolation.

We respectfully ask that you review the following document, which details our position on each of the five goals, and consider one of two options. Either send the plan back to the committee with the suggestion of increasing access to both public and State Approved Schools, which we are legally entitled to use, or consider our communities as geographically-isolated districts and ask the Secretary of Education to work with **all three** of our School Boards, our Superintendent, and the Legislature to transition our communities toward equitable education in Vermont.

Sincerely,

Melanie Cole