

Dear Secretary and members of the Board:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about Small School Grants:

1. As a board member of a small rural school which is currently considered geographically isolated, removing geographic isolation as an avenue to receiving SSGs feels punitive and arbitrary. Marlboro engaged thoroughly in Act 46 through a 706 (b) merger committee, and our residents rejected the merger by a large margin. Our residents knew that we were losing out on the merger grants and all of the supports offered to merging districts, and they voted not to merge because they felt strongly that not merging was a better way for Marlboro to meet the goals of Act 46 and would provide better outcomes for our kids. To now find out that a grant which we have been receiving for years is becoming harder to access seems like our small school, and many others like it, are being directly penalized for our decisions. 55 sec

2. In the broadest sense, many small schools in Vermont are the heartbeat of the community in which they sit. And Small Schools Grants are an essential part of the funding of many of these schools as provided by Act 60. We contend that the education the children from small towns receive in their own local schools is better adapted to their needs than what they would receive in larger more centralized schools, and we contend that the negative effects of closing down small rural schools is detrimental to the sense of Vermont for which young families are moving here. Using Marlboro as an example, our student numbers ~~have fluctuated but~~ have shown a steady rise over the last dozen years and this is because our school attracts young families-

Often the school is the magnet- our School Board Chair is a perfect example- he and his wife moved to Vermont and chose a SCHOOL community, and not a specific town, for their family. Look at the small towns that have vibrant community-based schools and they are more likely to be growing- having such a school does not guarantee that the town will grow but closing the school down does guarantee the loss of vitality. Is making small rural schools more vulnerable the message we want to send? 1 minute 15

3. Uncertainty about education funding is already affecting the people we see applying for jobs in Marlboro. We are now losing our beloved Phys Ed teacher because he feels like there is a better future for him teaching Phys Ed elsewhere, and during recent searches we have seen applicants hesitant to apply or accept offers. We already suffer from this because of the proposals coming from Montpelier in recent years to cut staff and to close small rural schools. Confusion about Small School Grants further threatens our excellent public schools and is driving talented teachers from Vermont. What kind of message do we want to send? 45 seconds

4. You are charged with coming up with guidelines to support the intent of the law as written. I understand that a figure of 30 minutes travel time between schools was floated at the March meeting, but I do not believe that the Legislature intended to essentially eliminate Geo Iso as one of the criteria for SSSGs. If only one town in the State is Isolated, what is the purpose of including Isolation as a criteria at all?

I understand that Act 46 implied that SSGs would become more difficult to receive and that this was used as an incentive to get districts to merge. Merged schools may feel that making SSGs available to unmerging schools goes against what they were told when merging. I disagree with this premise: a merged school will receive the Merger Support Grant year after year whether it achieves its goals or not, whereas an unmerging school will need to apply each year and has a set of criteria to meet in order to qualify.

And since many small schools have merged, the total number of schools qualifying for Geo Iso will be smaller and the total cost of SSGs will be less. I believe that the metrics for deciding geo iso which have been used to date, the 2011 report, will allow schools which have chosen this path to remain viable in our smallest and most rural communities and does not disadvantage already-merged schools. Small School Support grants account for less than one half of one percent of the overall education budget in Vermont. We believe, and we ask you to agree, that this small amount of money is well spent in keeping our smallest and most rural communities vital and growing.

1 minute 45 secs.

Total 4 minutes 40 seconds Respectfully, Dan MacArthur, Marlboro SB  
for approximately 30 of the last 40 years