

Montgomery Elementary SBE Submission

The Secretary's thoughtful examination and tentative approval of the Section 9 proposals from Stowe/Elmore-Morristown UUSD and Hartland/Weathersfield is logical and sound. Montgomery can point to myriad parallels within our plan and theirs. We strongly encourage the SBE to consider the multitude of ways we are already meeting and/or exceeding the goals of Act 46.

1. If you do not agree with the Secretary's recommendations regarding your district(s) as set out in the proposed statewide plan: a) Why is the Secretary's proposal not "possible" per Act 46, Section 10?

Should it be possible to bypass the will of the voters? Our voters have, on two occasions, determined it is not possible or tenable to dissolve our autonomous Board, absorb the debt of other districts, forfeit ownership of town property all while having taxes increase. Furthermore, we do not believe that forced merger makes the primary goals of ACT 46 any more possible to achieve within a merged structure versus independently.

b) Why is the Secretary's proposal not "practicable" per Act 46, Section 10?

Montgomery has an excellent working relationship within FNESU. We are already meeting the metrics of ACT 46 with regard to Excellence, Efficiency, Transparency/Accountability, with some minor areas for growth. Merger will not provide significant academic benefits or savings to MES, therefore it is most practicable for us to continue as a single district. Looking to Stowe for example, we are a more fiscally efficient (MES \$12,910 vs. Stowe's \$15,007 for FY18) while surpassing or coming close to matching their SBAC results even with a poverty rate of 10.7% in Stowe vs. 49.35% in Montgomery. This should be compelling to the SBE. It is not practicable to drag the community into merger against their wishes. When referencing other Districts, the Secretary acquiesces that merger is not practicable "because there does not appear to be any commitment of the communities to create a new definition of "us," there is scant likelihood that they will realize the potential opportunities of a larger, more flexible unified structure. More likely, unification would be blamed for any encountered difficulties." We are certain any dip in excellence and increase in costs/tax burden will be blamed on unification and undermine our history of mutual interest and collaboration within FNESU.

c) Why is the proposal you presented the "best" way to meet the Act 46 goals per Act 46, Sections 8(b) and 10?

For the reasons above and more we will touch on during our testimony, our Section 9 is undoubtedly the best way to meet the mandate. Our voters insist on remaining autonomous, maintaining our Board and, most significantly, the agency required to thoughtfully shape the future of our superb school. Our vision needs to come from within.

2. What did the Secretary's analysis and recommendations omit or misunderstand about your proposal? Why should the State Board find that information compelling?

The Secretary was extremely dismissive of our proposal while other similar districts, such as Stowe, were lauded. The idea that "no facts have been presented to support a conclusion that merger is not "possible" or "practicable" is stunning given the myriad ways we highlighted our Excellence, Efficiency and Equity. The Secretary neglected to mention the **Picus Report** declaring Montgomery School "exemplary", the recently published book, Growing into Equity: Professional Learning and Personalization in High-Achieving Schools, which highlights Montgomery as "**extraordinary**" and "**one of the schools that is really in the advance team for schools across the country**". These are significant omissions and again, when looking at Districts with an approved Section 9, not one can highlight such a consistent trend of local and National recognition. How then can the Secretary dismiss our Section 9 as "absent compelling evidence"?

The plan neglects to mention our SBAC scores; some of the highest in the State, our phenomenal early childhood play/preschool programs, excellent after school programming, a wide array of community enrichment activities, community partnerships and unique programming; while being one of the lowest spending Districts in the State. Additionally, we have the highest student/teacher ratio of 33 schools in our cohort and of 241 schools across the State. How exactly merger will serve us defies logic as we are already excelling and meeting the goals of ACT 46; any minimal gains will be overshadowed by what we stand to lose in merger.

It is unclear why the Secretary states "Experience throughout the State demonstrates that decreasing student population in a small district is not sustainable and ultimately leads to a downward spiral of increasing tax rates, reduced programming, and frequent staff turnover (which the Section 9 Proposal states is already an issue). Larger governance structures have been shown to provide the flexibility needed to mitigate annual budget and tax increases, moderate tax rate fluctuations, and allow small or struggling schools to stay open and programs to remain intact or be expanded." It is perplexing to have Montgomery singled out as opposed to many other schools which are legitimately dealing with declining population, increasing tax rates and reduced programming. Montgomery isn't even close to "struggling" and we are not at risk of closure due to these forces. Our challenge with teacher retention/staff turnover is neither unique to us nor reason to ignore the immense positives we highlight throughout our Section 9. Montgomery has been largely insulated from the population decline in the State and our population is actually increasing. People are drawn to our thriving resort town because of our phenomenal school, high school choice, immense recreational opportunities, and our progressive and inclusive community.