

Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union Response to State Wide Plan Proposal

Why is the Secretary's proposal not possible/practicable per Act 46, section 10?

Franklin has been designated as Geographically Isolated by the Agency of Education, both by the 2011 list (the only list that is in full compliance with the law) and by the new metrics. On November 7, 2017, at a legally warned meeting, the residents of Franklin voted on the following article: "Shall the Franklin School District be deemed an existing district for the purpose of Act 46/49, the School District Merger law, given the geographic isolation, thereby qualifying for an exemption from the requirements of Act 46/49 and the Statewide Plan." The result of that vote was 170 in favor, 0 opposed. Therefore, merging Franklin as the Secretary's proposal envisions is not possible.

There are a few reasons that the Secretary's proposal is not practicable for the remainder of our region. The first reason is that by its own admission, the Secretary's proposal fails to meet all the goals of Act 46. She quickly dismisses this shortcoming, saying that a contention that unification will raise tax rates for one or more groups of taxpayers cannot be the sole reason to prevent merger. The Secretary's own admission that her proposed plan is unable to meet all the goals of Act 46 certainly precludes it from being the "best" means of meeting the goals of Act 46. This alone should be grounds for the outright dismissal of the plan. Additionally, the Secretary's proposal causes harm to our students. The plan to remove Sheldon from Franklin Northwest will be detrimental to our students with the highest needs. As you are aware, some of these students have taken a long time to develop a trusting relationship with their Special Educators. Moving them into Franklin Northeast will force these students to start over, losing progress in the transition. Any plan that causes harm to any student surely cannot be the best means of achieving the goals of Act 46. Lastly, there is ZERO support for an imposed merger in three of our four communities and only a minority support in our fourth, as evidenced by our legally warned vote held in November, 2017. The Secretary refers to the results of that legally warned vote as "public sentiment". This is not "public sentiment", it is the will of the voters. This is the United States of America, and votes still matter in a democracy! Other communities were spared a forced merger based upon "the region's general reluctance to collaboration and resistance to centralization, even when required by statute, raise questions regarding whether any new structure would actually take advantage of the flexibility to achieve educational and fiscal improvement". Elsewhere, they say that "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". I can guarantee that we rise well above the level of "general reluctance" and are more in the "vehemently opposed" camp. I ask you, when looking at the votes held in our communities, do you honestly see a commitment to create a new definition of "us"? The Secretary says that community opposition does not make a merger impracticable, but that does not make it so. Our communities will oppose a forced merger by any legal means available.

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

Our proposal is the best way to meet the Act 46 goals because it was developed locally, by people intimately familiar with the history, culture, and the relationships and conflicts between our communities. It is the result of hundreds of hours of analyzing data, exploring options, and holding discussions to find our best means of achieving the goals of Act 46. We have done our due diligence and have clearly documented how our proposal can meet or exceed all the Act 46 Goals. Unlike the Secretary's proposal, our plan causes no harm to any student. It is built upon the idea that we can study our successes, and learn how to apply best practice across our schools to ensure the success of all our students. Our proposal has unanimous support in three of our communities, and a majority support in the fourth. Our communities will work diligently to ensure the success of our plan.

What did the Secretary's analysis and recommendations omit or misunderstand about your proposal.

The Secretary's analysis and recommendations are based upon misleading data to create the appearance of a school in crisis, one that cannot sustain itself. She points to a 23.86% decline in Franklin's ADM since 2014, and uses this to paint the picture of a school that is spiraling out of control (a shining example of why unification is the only solution). The fact that we are even discussing this brings into question the legitimacy of the conversation we had in February with the Secretary. This exact topic was discussed. The following explanation was provided, and then completely ignored. Franklin is not experiencing a "steady significant decline in its student population to a degree not faced elsewhere in the SU." This was a known anomaly, with a large graduating 6th grade coupled with a small incoming Kindergarten class created a temporary decline. It was also explained that this would be offset the

following year by the inverse. Not surprisingly, enrollment for the 2018/2019 school year is up 13% from last year, 117 from 103. We described the ebb and flow of enrollment numbers in a small town, but obviously no one was listening. For instance, enrollment for Franklin in 1970 was 129, or 9.3% higher than today. However, 1980's enrollment was 106, or 6% less than today. This natural fluctuation has been occurring for at least the last half century. Franklin's "steady, significant decline" is actually 1.7% since 2007, when enrollment was at 119. This is hardly the school in crisis that the Secretary depicts. The dire warnings about spiraling tax rates and turnover were as irrelevant in 1970 as they are today. Franklin spends less per pupil than 92% of all schools in Vermont. Franklin's turnover in the last 12 years consists of 4 classroom teachers, three of which retired with between 24 and 35 years of service. The fourth moved to another school after 7 years of service. If the Secretary had done just a little bit of research, it would have been obvious that Franklin is a thriving, sustainable school.

Another issue that is misunderstood about our proposal is our committee's finding that per pupil costs and tax rates would go up in three out of four of our communities. The Secretary questions whether our calculation "accounts for the potential savings that can be realized by the creative and efficient use of the unified district's resources and flexibility". This statement completely disregards the fact that our SU is already utilizing creative and efficient use of our SU's resources and flexibility. It is no accident that our schools spend less per pupil than between 81% (our largest elementary school) and 92% (our smallest elementary school) of all other schools in the state. We conducted a thorough analysis of our spending. We were only able to identify about \$85,000.00 potential savings. This amounts to less than .35 of 1% of the total budget, a negligible amount that does not change our findings in the least. Under the Secretary's plan, spending per pupil in Franklin increases by \$948.25, increasing local costs by \$115,819.26. Highgate's per pupil cost increases by \$159.78, increasing local costs by \$51,524.26. MVU's per pupil cost increases by \$64.24, resulting in a \$55,004.86 increase that is borne by all our towns. This is a clear failure of the Secretary's proposal to meet goal 5 of Act 46: Deliver education at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.

We strongly disagree with the Secretary's following statement: *"The juxtaposition of the Section 9 Proposal's focus on identifying one district's test scores as favorable and unlikely to improve with merger with the acknowledgement that there are disparities in assessment results and "gaps" in middle school programming exposes a parochial approach to regional analysis. As is often the case in Vermont's very small districts, the Section 9 proposal's self-analysis and conclusions underscore the reality that comparison of test scores is generally not helpful because in most instances the class sizes are too small to permit disaggregation by poverty, special needs, gender, or any other factor."* In 2009, The VT Department of Education chose Franklin as one of three schools to be part of a case study on poverty and effective schools ("Roots of Success"). Franklin was chosen based on their high achievement of both low income students and their peers. In other words, the Department of Education themselves disaggregated the test results to arrive at their conclusion. In 2011, they identified Franklin one of fourteen effective schools in Vermont. Again, they arrived at this decision by disaggregating our test results over a three year period. All of the identified schools had to have at least 25% of their children receiving free/reduced lunch and more than 80% of all students proficient in reading and math. More than 70% of students in poverty had to be proficient in reading and math for a school to qualify for the list. They hoped that "Franklin's experience would be useful to other schools working to close achievement gaps and ensure positive outcomes for all students." That is the cornerstone of our Section 9 Proposal's action plan regarding priority 2: Lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards. We plan to take what is already working, and use that experience to ensure positive outcomes for all students, exactly as the Department of Education envisioned. By contrast, the Secretary's proposal's action plan regarding priority 2 amounts to "there is no basis to conclude that merger will not lead to better results when the Legislature determined that a unified district is the structure most likely to meet the Act 46 goals".

As to why the State Board should find this information compelling, we feel that the answer is obvious. The legislature itself recognizes that there is no "one size fits all" approach to meeting the goals of Act 46. Our AGS proposal is the result of hundreds of hours of self-analysis, discussion, and exploration of alternatives. We have clearly proven the ability of our proposal to meet or exceed all the Act 46 goals. The Secretary at no point contests our ability to do so, only that our AGS proposal doesn't rise to the impossible standard of the Secretary's interpretation of the "best" means. In contrast, we have proven by our findings that the Secretary's proposal does not even meet all of Act 46's goals. We have shown how the Secretary's proposal will do harm to our students. We have shown by a legally warned vote that there will be zero support for an imposed merger, and that such a merger will be opposed by any legal means possible. Given this, no reasonable person could conclude that the Secretary's proposal is the "best" means of achieving the goals of Act 46 in the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union.