

Act 46: Will the Six Towns in the WWSU Vote to Be Governed By One Board and One Budget?

By Brigid Scheffert Nease, Superintendent of Schools

The WWSU Executive Board and the Act 46 Board Study Committee have been meeting jointly twice monthly since this past September. Their meetings are usually held on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of the month from 5:30-9:30 at Harwood Union High School in the library. (They have a rescheduled meeting next Thursday, 11-19 due to the holiday.) Along with the administration and consultants, they are studying the law and its expected implications for the seven schools in the WWSU, in order to determine how best to proceed for our communities. All meetings are open to the public and usually broadcast on Mad River TV Channel 44.

Based on where the group is in our study process, we are ready to begin communicating regularly with our communities at large. This is the first of what I hope to be many publications from my office moving forward. This law is, of course, complex. The public can keep informed and up to date by visiting the www.wwsu.org website, where a tab has been created with all the documents and study materials the working group is utilizing. On the home page you will also find a dedicated email address, act46merger@wwsu.org where questions and thoughts can be shared with the committee and administration. While we do not have the capacity for individual replies, we will attempt to respond to the questions raised through future publications and at meetings. My State of the State to the WWSU faculty was dedicated to Act 46. It can be viewed by clicking on the link on the wwsu.org home page. You can also subscribe and follow my blog at neasesnotes.blogspot.com. The VT Agency of Education just revamped their website last week to include many Act 46 helpful resources.

Simply put, Act 46 is legislation that passed the spring of 2015 that turns supervisory unions (many boards and many budgets) into supervisory districts (like a Burlington, for example) where all seven schools are unified in a Prekindergarten through grade 12 structure governed by one board and one budget.

The stated goals of Act 46 of 2015 are five-fold: 1) provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of education opportunities statewide; 2) lead students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards; 3) maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility; 4) promote transparency and accountability; and 5) deliver education at a cost that parents, voters and taxpayers value.

In WWSU we understand that Act 46 is law and by 2019 all supervisory unions will be merged in some way, either voluntarily or by the authority of the State Board of Education. In WWSU we understand that Act 46 allows SU's to design mergers now (the accelerated merger process) and take advantage of tax incentives (the carrot) that won't be available should we decide to take the "wait and see" approach (the stick). Either way, we will be merged by 2019. We can do it for ourselves now or let the State do it to us later. From everything we have studied to date, it appears that the first groups to the party are the

biggest winners, with all the incentives and none of the consequences, and the last groups to the party are the biggest losers with none of the incentives and all of the consequences.

At the present time, the WWSU working group has not formulated a position as to whether we think we would be winners, and, if so, how big. We do know that even if we feel we will be losers overall, we will lose bigger if we wait and do not take advantage of the incentives available to us.

The first real decision to be made is whether to hold a special election, likely in May or June 2016, so that all of our taxpayers will vote by Australian ballot to decide whether or not we will merge. A straw poll of representatives from all towns at our last meeting was unanimous to go for the vote.

Will merger necessarily close schools? No. Will merger make it easier to consider school closures? Yes. However, while it is no secret that a goal of Act 46 is to increase district-level student-to-staff ratios, school closure is no more a certainty under the merged board structure than future school closure in the absence of merger might be, considering declining enrollment trends. The only reason any of our schools would close is because we don't have enough students to populate them. This will be true in either scenario.

Will merger save taxpayer dollars? Maybe, or maybe not. The statewide education financing formula doesn't change with Act 46 and there's still only one checkbook at the State that taxpayers pay into for Vermont's public education system as a whole. The amount of burden and relief depends not just upon how we, in WWSU, budget, but how every school district in our state budgets. Act 46 does include tax relief incentives, but only under a voluntary merger. If we wait until the State Board of Education merges us in 2019, we will not receive any of the tax relief incentives offered in the law. However, through the education fund, we will be paying the incentives sent to the towns that have merged.

We are in the process of identifying the pros and the cons of merging our schools into one union school district. My next piece will share more of the specific benefits identified.

We believe that all WWSU schools offer a high-quality education environment, but Harwood Union High School is suffering the effects of declining enrollment from all of our towns, and that trend is expected to continue. In 2009 HUHS had 850 equalized pupils to draw revenue into the system. Costs including labor (roughly 3-5%) and health care (roughly 4-8%) (approximately 80% of the total budget) have continued to rise each year since then. The number of equalized pupils for FY 2016 at HUHS is 707. Therefore \$9,459 per pupil x 143 fewer equalized pupils means a loss of revenue to operate HUHS of \$1,352,637. We have not been one of those lucky communities where enrollment has risen and fallen but ultimately either leveled out or resulted in a small net decrease. We cannot afford ourselves now.

The high school building and its learning labs are aging and outdated. The enrichment opportunities continue to take hits each and every year as budget cuts are imposed. Other top tier high schools across the state are increasing the number of AP classes, adding languages and STEM programs, offering extra-curricular activities like speech and debate team, future engineers of America, Robotics Club, classes in coding, and so on. A bare bones high school should be a concern to all of us as this, like nothing else, impacts property values. Families move into the towns of WWSU not just for the elementary school

experience but also for the secondary school experience. We have a collective responsibility to maximize efficiencies across our SU to the greatest extent possible and improve the educational experience overall at the most reasonable cost that we can realize for our taxpayers.