

As requested at the August 3rd, 2016 Information Forum on Act 46 hosted by the Reading Elementary School board, this is a summary on school mergers prepared by School Board Vice Chair, John Philpin.

Any opinions expressed here are based on the following: I am retired after 30+ years as a psychologist, law-enforcement consultant, and author of eleven books and numerous articles. I've been a small-town school-board member for a total of 18 years, as well as a public and private school consultant.

I followed the development of the current reform movement beginning with Richard Cate's "white paper" on governance (read: merger of governing structures) in 2006, the subsequent statewide analyses of school governance, and the progression of the various bills through the Legislature culminating in Act 46. I have also reviewed studies on consolidation (rural and urban), and educational quality (small vs. large schools), from the 1950s to the present. The former are quite clear in their conclusion that while consolidation may work well in some urban areas, it is ineffective in rural areas; the latter are also quite clear that the small-school setting is superior both educationally and for the child's emotional development. I've also explored studies that place current reform efforts in the context of national financial developments during the last 20+ years, the decline in federal funding, increases in un-funded mandates, the focus on privatization (charter schools, vouchers), and the consequent ever-increasing pressure on local funding of education largely due to economic stagnation. Note further that Vermont's education fund suffered at the hands of former Governor Douglas who moved expenditures for teacher pensions and Corrections Department education services from the general fund to the education fund, and Governor Shumlin who removed \$23 million from the education fund to cover shortfalls in the general fund. Pressure on education expenses is not due entirely to declining enrollment; political maneuvering also plays a significant role, as does the very nature of our "free-market" economy. Increasingly, responsibility for worsening conditions has been incorrectly placed on teachers and teachers' unions, and on the local school boards, yet each decline in education funding has coincided with periods of economic stagnation.

Vermont's Picus Report's 2012 preliminary draft includes: "In the course of our work, including a series of public hearings, a number of concerns with the way schools are funded were identified. These represent genuine issues that impact the resources available to schools and the ability of Vermont citizens to pay for those schools. However, it is our strong view that none of those issues are so serious that the state needs to completely replace its approach to funding schools – rather each needs serious and careful consideration by the Legislature, which should consider modifications to those components of the system that create these issues." By the time of the Picus Report's final draft in January 2016 ("Using the Evidence-Based Method to Identify Adequate Spending Levels for Vermont Schools"), the focus had shifted: "There are likely several explanations for the substantial difference between what Vermont schools currently spend and the EB [evidence-based] cost estimate. Before identifying the source of the cost differences, it is important to note that the EB model, although designed from the school level, applies a set of standard measures to the schools in Vermont. The EB model therefore can not accommodate all of the individual circumstances of individual schools, particular in a state where local taxpayers and educators have a great deal of control in determining education spending levels. Policy makers should proceed cautiously in attempting to achieve savings because the complexities of school finance may lead to unintended consequences." Clearly, the evidence-based concept entered the education lexicon some time during those four years, and is but one of the private corporate/business concepts applied to public education.

As our supervisory union has begun the gradual process of centralization (special education, transportation, technology services), costs have increased. The SU has already begun creating new administrative positions to accommodate the needs of outlying schools; services received have

declined, our budget has increased. The evidence-based model also permeates the school culture in part as a result of federal mandates: we will have standards (one size fits all), and we must test to those standards; this intrusion upon our school's style and culture is disruptive, serves no constructive purpose, and adds to our budget.

Ours is a small school: 55 students in PK-6. More than half of our students are enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program. We have received state and national recognition for our programs and, until introduction of the SBACs, consistently performed at or near the top for schools in this supervisory union. Although we receive excellent community support, many voters are concerned with property taxes and believe that Act 46 will reduce their tax burden. It will not. Reorganization on the scale proposed by the Legislature is based on a business model that can result only in the privatization of public education. In "Economies of Scale and Rural Schools", Tholkes and Sederberg, University of Minnesota, 1990, the authors found that "savings realized from increased purchasing power" evaporated as expenses for transportation, insurance related to transportation, distribution of services and materials, (central) administrative salaries increased.

Act 46 will not realize its stated goals of decreasing expenses, improving education quality, and achieving equity. The Common Core Curriculum and the SBAC repetitive testing will increase costs while not reflecting anything approaching an accurate report on school and student progress.