

Should School Boards Merge?

What is the right amount of school oversight to maintain quality and keep school spending reasonable? Does Vermont still need a school board for every school? These decade-old conversations actually began in the late 1800s, when legislature began reducing the number of schools from 2500, strategically placed so that even rural children could access them by walking or on horseback, to the roughly 300 school buildings where children are educated today. In the early 1900s, state leaders realized there were great variations in program quality across the different towns, so legislature arbitrarily conjoined rural communities into management units they called supervisory unions. A superintendent was hired for each of the roughly 46 entities to create continuity of curriculum and oversee the work of teachers. The 11 more urban communities like Burlington, Montpelier, and Rutland were large enough to support the employment of their own superintendent, who managed the business of what became known as supervisory districts. As student enrollment grew, principals were hired at the school level. Each town elected school board members to provide governance oversight for superintendents and principals. Three members of each town school board serve on the supervisory union (SU) board. This system of management and governance oversight is complex and difficult to create efficiencies, due in part to overlapping boundaries of authority.

In the late 1960s, in an effort to provide consistent quality of high school curricular offerings and to keep pace with expanding national education rigor, 24 union high schools and some union elementary schools were created. All was well until the late 1990s, when school enrollments began to decline and costs started to escalate.

This history provides context for passage of Act 46 during the 2015 legislative session. Law makers were influenced by unsustainable property tax increases and education costs that are driven by declining student enrollment and low student/staff ratios.

Act 46, using a system of “honey and hammers,” induces school leaders and communities to study the challenges and benefits of merging school boards. The “honey” is the allure of reduced homestead tax rates for either four or five years, depending on the current governance structure within each SU. The “hammers” are state-levied options which include an annual 5% tax rate increase for SUs that don’t comply with centralization of special education or transportation management functions. Sanctions also may include State Board mandated mergers of local school boards in SUs that don’t meet Education Quality Standards and don’t demonstrate low-cost management efficiency. The legislative premise of Act 46 is a single PK-12 school board, overseeing multiple schools, will increase efficiency of school management, improve education quality, and reduce costs.

So let’s move the context from a statewide policy focus to boots on the ground conversations and impact in a single supervisory union, i.e. Franklin Northwest SU. FNW school board members and administrators tracked progress of House Bill 361 (which, upon passage by the House and Senate, became Act 46) as it became law. To more deeply understand the intricacies of the new law and plan next steps, school leaders in FNW hosted two information sessions with consultants and the executive directors of the Vermont School Boards and Superintendent’s Associations. One outcome of the meetings is the FNWSU Board decided to convene a preliminary study, from which board members would receive pertinent information necessary to guide future decision making.

The Act 46 governance study is underway and paid for by a state grant. Peter Clarke, former Montpelier High School principal, is the consultant who is guiding the FNWSU study. A school board member from each of the five FNWSU school districts has been empowered to work with the superintendent on the committee. The goal is to gather information necessary to advise the local boards on the benefits and challenges for creating a single, PK-12 union school district. The study committee meetings are open to the public and convene on November 18th in Sheldon, December 9th at

Highgate, and January 5th at Franklin Central School. All meetings begin at 6:00, with an information update for members of the public, and 6:30 for study committee deliberation.

Here's the FNWSU paradox. If the governance study identifies possible benefits for creating a single PK-12 school board, this is what it might look like in FNW. Local school boards in Franklin, Highgate, Swanton, and MVU would merge together, creating one school board that would provide oversight to the superintendent and four principals. One budget would be voted on to operate the four schools. Sheldon would continue to operate its own PK-8 school and pay tuition to area high schools. Tax payers in Franklin, Highgate, and Swanton would receive an 8 cent reduction on homestead property taxes in 2016. No change occurs unless voters agree to support the change.

Sounds like an easy decision; it's not. Local school leaders are currently weighing the merits of providing substantial property tax savings with giving up local authority over schools. State bureaucrats maintain that increased efficiency of school management will reduce costs and improve quality. The struggle on the education policy dance floor right now is who leads and what's the right harmony? Stay tuned because the same music is playing in every small Vermont community.