

## **School Board Leadership in a Historic Time**

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Act 46 passed one year ago in response to persistent concerns about equity, quality, and cost in a state educating 20,000 fewer students than we were two decades ago. Vermont has one of the most complex education governance structures in the country, as well as the smallest school districts in the nation. We spend more than \$1.5 billion through 330 administrative units serving 80,000 students. Over a third of our school districts oversee a single school with fewer than 100 students. Our cost per student is among the highest in the country, but our student outcomes are not always commensurate with the level of investment we commit to education.

Act 46 calls on school boards and communities to have a much-needed conversation about how to design a better system that responds to our demographic challenges while preserving our commitment to high quality public education.

In the year since Act 46 passed, I have spent much of my time with school boards and communities discussing the opportunities and challenges created by the law. While there is not universal support among Vermonters for the types of changes contemplated by Act 46, Vermont's school board members are rising to the task of engaging their communities in this conversation, and together are charting a positive course forward for public education in Vermont. This course builds upon our many strengths and recognizes that preserving the status quo is not always in the best interests of the students and communities we serve.

Since last June, more than fifty communities in twelve supervisory unions have supported the creation of unified union school districts designed to achieve greater equity, quality, and cost effectiveness.

I sometimes hear from outside observers that these communities are “the easy ones” or “the low-hanging fruit.” But these unification efforts were not easy. These mergers are the product of school board leaders and administrators taking the time to understand the law, analyze the options for their communities, get questions answered, seek common understanding and common ground, work across communities to draft articles that reflect shared values, attend multiple public forums, and have countless one-on-one conversations with friends and neighbors, teachers, parents, and students to foster appreciation and support for change.

It is no accident that the margins of approval for many of these votes exceeded 60 percent. Those results are a reflection of the hard work of school boards and the trust

that Vermonters place in their elected officials to develop a plan that preserves what matters most to their communities – not just for the next three years, but for the next generation.

While the recent merger votes were not easy, this task is even more demanding in some regions of Vermont. Certain districts have to contend with differing tuitioning and operating structures, challenging topography, vocal community members unconvinced about the need to change, or fiscal or cultural differences that make unification seem unpalatable. And yet, I have every confidence that the same commitment to students, community values, and locally designed solutions will result in the creation of more systems pointed toward the goals of Act 46: equity, quality, cost effectiveness, transparency and accountability.

School boards today are leaders in a dynamic and historic time. Some say that Act 46 will diminish the role of school boards in Vermont's education landscape. But the leadership being demonstrated by boards today is a testament to the public institution that is the school board. We know we must evolve and adapt to meet the needs of today's students and communities without sacrificing our core principles and commitments. It is school boards today that will help Vermont's communities navigate this period of change, and it is the school boards of tomorrow that will ensure that the reality lives up to the promise.