

The 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 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.

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 than future school closure in the absence of merger might be, considering declining enrollment trends.

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. 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.

In WWSU we believe that merging will help us to achieve the goals of Act 46 a variety of potential ways. Merging WWSU together under one governance structure will allow us to:

1. Provide better and more substantial equity in the quality and variety of education opportunities by, for example:
 - o Allowing more flexibility in how we structure our elementary schools, our two middle schools and potentially cost-shifting dollars to bolster Harwood Union High School

- Making possible school choice within our merged district allowing students the option to attend the school closest to their home
 - Reducing disparities in educational offerings across our schools
 - Offering enrichment opportunities in a more equitable way
2. Move from good to great working together under one umbrella as we lead our students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards by, for example:
- Developing specialized 21st century educational opportunities across schools
 - Establishing more support services among schools
 - Addressing proficiency-based learning opportunities in a more consistent and effective manner
 - Coordinating the curriculum throughout all our schools
3. Maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share and transfer resources by, for example:
- reducing town treasurer services and expenses
 - reducing board-related expenses (stipends, dues, fees, other expenses)
 - reducing the number of annual audits performed
 - reducing board insurance payments
 - relocating WWSU central offices into an existing school building
 - consolidating food services
 - sharing maintenance, operations and equipment costs
 - cost savings associated with staffing flexibilities
4. Promote transparency and accountability by, for example:
- consolidating data collection, recording, reporting and analysis
5. Deliver K-12 public education for all our students at a cost that parents, voters and taxpayers value by, for example:
- Taking full advantage of the tax incentives that are available under Act 46 accelerated merger: homestead tax rate reduction of \$.10 in 2017, \$.08 in 2018, \$.06 in 2019, \$.04 in 2020, and \$.02 in 2021.
 - Taking advantage of further incentives that allow us to keep our small schools grants (approximately \$100,000/year), and to keep the 3.5% hold-harmless protection for declining enrollment, which otherwise will be eliminated in 2021.

We believe that WWSU offers 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. 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. 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 and we have a collective responsibility to maximize efficiencies across our SU to the greatest extent possible and improve the educational experience overall.