

Testimony of Elizabeth Burrows

Tuesday, September 7, 2021

I write today as Mount Ascutney School District Board Chair and as a member of Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union, which extends beyond the district I cover as a Vermont House Representative.

By way of background, I was elected to the then-West Windsor school board in 2014, and within six months of election became Board Chair. As such, I was also a representative on our Act 46 study committee, which looked at total merger for our SU's four districts into one. Ultimately, our district merged with our neighbor, Windsor, forming what is today the Mount Ascutney School District, and I would like to emphasize that we are happy as a merged district. That is not my point today. Today I would like to talk about the effect of several elements I feel are crucial in this discussion:

- cap on tuitions
- how allowable tuition is decided
- excess spending threshold
- miscellaneous expenditures bill-backs
- special education

At the time of the merger, our small board governed matters concerning one very small district, which operated one very small K-6 school, Albert Bridge School. Also pre-merger, we had fiscal responsibility for the education of students beyond grade 7, but governance-wise we were able to do nothing more than to starve our small school in order to pay for the tuitions of our school's graduates.

Coincidental with the apex of our merger discussions was a perfect financial storm for the West Windsor School District. We had a 'cover charge' for students walking in the door on IEPs at receiving schools— sometimes reaching \$9,000 or \$10,000, without the costs of the special education itself, also incurred by the district. This was before our SU began divvying up special ed costs by equalized pupil count, which alleviated some of the overall cost of special ed but not the cover charge.

We also had students going all the way up to Richmond Middle and Hanover High, in the Dresden district, for tuition rates topping out at \$26k that year. Hanover also tacked on "bill-backs" at the end of the year, which the year I was elected to the board topped out at close to \$50,000— doesn't sound like much, but at a small school it equals a salary. These are not itemized, and boards are not able to budget for them.

Added to that was the Excess Spending Penalty, which was layered on the very top, above an unfavorable CLA rating that year. To us, that penalty was on the excess spending of other districts, which was passed on to their respective 'customers.' I saw that on your spreadsheet of Excess Spending Penalties over the last five years, our district had the second-highest in the state with a rate of more than \$700 per equalized pupil. This charge was unfair as it caused our district to cannibalize our small school budget, the only thing over which our board had control.

Our choice was between keeping our school open and retaining school choice. It became clear through public forums that families were moving to our town strictly to take advantage of school choice. I knocked on more than 300 doors to ask residents what they thought, and overwhelmingly the answer was that a town without a school dies, so we should fight to keep our school open by merging districts. I looked into the decrease of revenue to our state when a small school closes, with families choosing not to move to towns and subsequent death of the towns, and projected on the back of an envelope a dramatic loss of state tax dollars as a result of such measures. If we are seeking to draw more *families* into our state, and subsequently increase the number of students attending our schools, increasing the number of drive-through towns with no schools is not going to work.

Going back to my original points:

- A cap on tuitions would prevent small districts from being victimized by the excess spending threshold, by way of receiving districts not being able to pass on their own excess spending to sending districts. It's inequitable.
- School choice itself is also inequitable. Families who can, drive their students long distances to take advantage of opportunities not available to families who cannot drive long distances. Families who can afford to move into choice towns are able to send their students to private schools, while families who can't afford to move miss out on those opportunities. Why can't we limit full school choice to neighboring public districts, with payments beyond the state average being billed to families as is done with private school tuitions?
- The tuition rate is set by each district, but the allowable rate is the guideline. I have not heard a formula or rationale for the allowable rate, and it is not the same as the state average.
- The Excess Spending Threshold is unfair and hobbles small sending districts, who have to pay for the excess spending of receiving districts. It should be applied only to in-district spending—which would still not extinguish the habit of receiving districts passing on their excess spending to sending districts, but would at least not penalize sending districts for the spending of receiving districts.
- Miscellaneous expenditure bill-backs, and special education entry fees should be abolished. They are more ways that receiving districts pad their budgets, when the addition of a few students from smaller districts does not require significant added costs to educating each pupil.

Balancing the interests of education is a huge and unwieldy task, and I know some of the issues I have brought up are unpopular. But as you consider the weighting study, these inequities to towns and families should also be taken into account. Thank you for allowing time for public testimony, including my own.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Burrows
Chair, Mount Ascutney School District, and
Representative, Windsor-1