

## Frequently Asked Questions: Answered by *The Northshire Merger Study Committee*

Dear Residents,

We at the Northshire Merger Study Committee acknowledge that it is no simple task understanding school governance in Vermont and how it could change under Act 46. Members of our communities have a lot of questions about the impacts of merger. This document is our attempt to explain what is at stake in simple language. Refer to the contact info provided at the bottom of each page if you would like more information.

Sincerely,

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### What is Act 46?

Act 46 is an education law passed by the state legislature in 2015 that “encourages and eventually requires school districts to merge into larger units over the next [three] years in an effort to better serve students and better manage costs” (Tiffany Danitz Pache from VT Digger).

### What is a merger study committee and why do we have one?

Under Vermont law, districts are required to form a study committee with representatives from the member districts. The committee is required to study the benefits and implications of merging. After studying the possible merger, the committee writes a report that recommends if merger is advisable or not.

### Who has the final say if my district will merge with the other districts in this study committee?

Once the merger committee finishes their study report, it needs to be reviewed by the State Board of Education. If the State Board approves the proposed merger, then the electorate of each district will vote on it; this is not to say, however, that the voters have the final say. If a district does not voluntarily merge, then it is very likely that the state will force it to merge in the future.

Want more info? Go to our website at [www.sites.google.com/site/northshiremergerstudy/](http://www.sites.google.com/site/northshiremergerstudy/)  
Have questions or suggestions? Contact committee chair Jon Wilson at [jon.wilson@brsu.org](mailto:jon.wilson@brsu.org)  
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### Which districts are represented on this committee?

The districts of Danby, Dorset, Manchester, Mountain Towns RED (Londonderry, Landgrove, Peru, and Weston comprise this unified district), Mt. Tabor, and Sunderland make up the Northshire Merger Study Committee. Last fall, the school boards of these districts agreed to form this committee. The group has 17-members on it. The number of representatives from each district is determined by its population.

### What does this committee expect is the timeline for a possible merger?

**This Fall:** In September and October, the committee will hold public forums in our communities to seek out feedback on our current plan. Once we have your input, we will amend our report accordingly before sending it to the State Board of Education for review.

**This Winter:** We currently plan on having an answer from the state board no later than mid-January. Provided the state board does not recommend we make drastic changes, we will hold informational forums in our communities aimed at educating voters on the implications and benefits of the proposed merger.

**Early Next Year and Beyond:** We are planning that a vote will be held in each town in February or March. If the merger is approved by the voters, the new unified district must be operational on or before July 1, 2019.

### What type of merger are we recommending that the newly unified district will be?

There are two current options for the newly merged district, these include becoming a supervisory district or a RED, a Regional Education District.

### What is a Supervisory District?

According to Act 46, this is a governance structure that is made up of one PK-12 school district that has the responsibility of providing for the education of all students that live within its defined geographic boundaries. A supervisory district would have one teachers' contract, one governing board, one set of policies to create goals, one budget and eventually one tax rate. A supervisory district will also be large enough to have one superintendent and one governing board. A supervisory district is also responsible for meeting all public assurance obligations (ex: audits) for the entire district.

### What is a Regional Education District, or RED?

A Regional Education District, or RED, is one of the governance structures that this committee is considering as a possibility for merger. In 2010, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 153 which was intended to stimulate "voluntary mergers" of school districts with tax incentives into REDs. A RED is a special type of unified



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school district. If districts meet the basic requirements and merge to become a RED, the new district would have one school board, one budget, and eventually one tax rate.

In 2012, Londonderry, Landgrove, Peru, and Weston merged to form the Mountain Towns RED. Before the merger, each of the four towns had its own town school board responsible for its Pre-K and 9-12 students. In addition the four towns belonged to a union school district which had operated the Flood Brook Union School for all of their K-8 students since 1968. The Flood Brook Union District had its own school board with proportional representation from all 4 towns. The merger to form the Mt Towns RED (the first in the state) consolidated all five school boards to form one district responsible for all Pre-K - 12 students with a single board, budget, and tax rate. A RED operates within a supervisory union alongside other districts -- the Mountain Towns Red is part of the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union. If the proposed merger is accepted by the voters, the Mt Towns RED will dissolve; Landgrove, Londonderry, Peru and Weston will become separate towns within the newly consolidated district and the Flood Brook School will be one of the district's five public schools.

A RED under Act 153 is, for all intents and purposes, identical to the "alternative" governance structure stated in Act 46. Unlike Act 153, Act 46 puts more pressure on districts to merge and to contain spending.

### **Does a merger mean that schools in our area will close?**

In August, our committee reached an initial verbal agreement in regard to the requirements for closing a school in the new unified district. Our proposed plan states that no school will be closed the first four years after merging and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the new board must approve a school closure thereafter. In the coming meetings, we will finalize the other requirements.

### **How could merging under Act 46 districts impact school choice?**

Merging into a unified district will impact school choice for some of our districts. It is legally required that all students in a school district have the same school choice option. Danby, Mt Tabor, and Sunderland currently have 7-12 choice while Manchester, Dorset, and the Mountain Towns RED all have 9-12 choice. The most likely solution to reconciling these two different choice options is for Danby, Mt. Tabor and Sunderland to change to 9-12 choice. There are two primary reasons why this solution is most likely: Dorset, Manchester, and the Mountain Towns RED districts operate schools at this grade level (it is illegal for a district to operate a school and offer choice for the same grade level); the students in 7 and 8 for these districts largely attend their district schools.



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Since the proposed unified district would have 9-12 choice, the voters of Sunderland, Mt. Tabor and Danby would need to approve changing from 7-12 choice to 9-12 choice to be apart of the new district. The merger committee is currently discussing grandfathering options.

In addition, we discussed recommending a public school choice option for all students in the newly unified district in grades 7 or 8 within the public school options available in the new unified district that operate these grades. The specific language for this option is still being worked out at this time.

While all students in the new unified district will retain school choice for grades 9-12, a merger of our nine towns could impact the amount of tuition payments to independent schools. By law, school district voters determine how much tuition they will pay for each of their school choice students each year: for independent schools they may pay the union school district average amount for that year or they may approve any larger amount. This is where our districts have differed. Manchester pays the full Burr and Burton tuition (\$16,250 this year) for students who attend BBA and the state average (\$14,773) to all other independent schools. Danby, Dorset, Mt Tabor, and Sunderland pay the BBA rate to BBA and The Long Trail School, and the average rate to all other independent schools. The Mountain Towns RED (Landgrove, Londonderry, Peru and Weston) have traditionally paid the BBA rate to all independent schools attended by their students. (For students who attend public high schools, like Arlington or Leland and Gray, all towns must pay the announced tuition rate for that school.) In the proposed single merged district, one tuition payment policy would cover all 9-12 students. Again, the decision on how much to pay would rest with the voters of that combined district. The current arrangement could change for some towns. This would remain an annual decision for the voters.

### **If the districts in this committee merged, what would the new school board look like?**

Before answering this question, we on the Northshire Study Committee acknowledge that none of our proposals are set in stone. We have a proposal for the size and the composition of the new board. We will be seeking out feedback from our communities in the coming weeks and months. There are nine towns that are participating in our study committee and our proposal calls for a 13-member board. Nine of these seats are designated for each of the nine towns. In other words, every town is guaranteed that it will have one seat on the board, but how this candidate is elected is unique. Let's say that Jane Doe from Landgrove wants to run for the Landgrove seat on the board. In order to get on the ballot, Jane must be a resident of the town and must be eligible to serve as a member of the school board--only Landgrove residents can sign the petition to get her on the ballot. Once Jane is on the ballot, however, every voter in all of the towns in the new unified district will vote on the seat Jane is seeking. This non-proportional system of voting, where officials are elected by a single multi-town electorate, is called *at-large voting*. To summarize, every voter in the new unified district would

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have an opportunity to vote on each seat that is up for election.

So, nine of the seats are reserved for each of the nine towns, but what about the other four seats? The study committee proposed that these four seats should be up for grabs among the four largest towns. That means, in order to be eligible to run for one of these seats, the candidate has to be a resident of Danby, Dorset, Londonderry, or Manchester. The scenario could potentially arise that all four seats are won by candidates from one town. The committee members recognized that while this is possible, the at-large voting system provides a reasonable check to power since the voters would likely prevent any single town from dominating the board for a significant time period. The committee members also discussed how such a system could lead to more collaboration and communication among our towns and healthier competition in our school board elections, given the fact that candidates currently often run unchallenged or seats remain vacant for extended periods.

### **What does school governance look like in our state and our region today?**

Currently, our local districts are a part of the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union, or BRSU. This Supervisory Union consists of the following 11 school districts: Danby, Dorset, Manchester, Mountain Towns Regional Education District, Mt. Tabor, Pawlet, Rupert, Sunderland, Union District #23, and Union District #47 (for more info about each district [click on this link](#)) By law, the supervisory union is responsible for all central office business management, special education programming and staffing, curriculum coordination and implementation, teacher professional development, and student transportation for all of the member districts.

Each school district has its own individual school board, budget, and education property tax rate. There is also a BRSU board, which consists of members of the aforementioned boards, that hires the superintendent and sets policies and assessments for the member districts. Among other things, Act 46 aims to merge school districts so that we have fewer districts and supervisory unions statewide.

### **What has school governance historically looked like in our region?**

In the second half of the 19th century, Vermont had approximately 2,500 school districts with multiple districts existing in individual towns. In 1892, legislation was passed that brought this tally down to 300 which is close to the number we have today. Many of these newly formed school districts were established according to town boundaries. Because many Vermont towns have the same boundaries as school districts, it is a common misconception that the town and the district are tied together in their governance. While they often share the same electorate and the same geographical boundaries, a municipality and a school district are two separate governing entities, with separate boards and separate budgets that determine separate property tax rates. This



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common confusion is not helped by the fact that many towns in Vermont have their district meetings and their town meetings on the same day.

Before the turn of the century, the legislature enacted more school governance reform intended to provide better *supervision* of the many Vermont schools under the oversight of a Supervisory Union. A Supervisory Union is a defined school system that is led by a superintendent. By the time the Red Sox won their second World Series in 1912, Vermont had over 50 Supervisory Unions. A century later, the number of supervisory unions and school districts have not changed much--whether this stasis is good or bad for students and taxpayers depend on which Vermonter you ask.