

**Act 46: School District Consolidation in Vermont**

Thetford Act 46 Town Forum  
March 22, 2016

**Challenges Facing Vermont Schools**

- High expectations for schools to meet the needs of today’s students – Education Quality Standards, Universal Pre-K, Act 77
- Increasing poverty and addiction rates
- Growing inequity in student opportunity and outcomes
- High leadership turnover
- Fiscal challenges

**Challenges Facing Vermont Schools**

**Fiscal Challenges in VT in a Nutshell:**

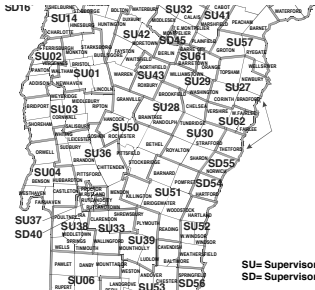
Declining Enrollments  
+  
Increasing Costs  
= Higher Per Pupil Costs  
⇒ Higher property tax burdens

**Challenges Facing Vermont Schools**

**Governance:** Vermont arguably has the most complicated governance structure in the United States:


- Vermont has 362 school districts for 94,000 students as compared to...
- Maine, which has 164 districts for 185,000 students or...
- Maryland, which has 24 school districts for 866,000 students

**Examples of Vermont’s SUs**



SU= Supervisory Union  
SD= Supervisory District

**Act 46: Creating PreK-12 Systems**



Act 46: Creating PreK-12 Systems

On or before July 1, 2019 educational opportunities in Vermont shall be provided through “**sustainable governance structures**” that provide PreK-12 educational opportunities at a reasonable cost.

Act 46: Creating PreK-12 Systems

These governance structures are expected to achieve the following outcomes:

- Provide **equity** in the quality and variety of educational opportunities
- Lead students to **meet or exceed the Education Quality Standards**
- **Maximize operational efficiencies** through greater flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, with a goal of increasing district-level student-to-staff ratios
- Promote **transparency and accountability**

**Act 46: Preferred Governance Structure**

- A single PreK-12 district
- Serving at least 900 students
- That has one of the four most common structures:
  - Operates all grades PreK-12;
  - Operates PreK-8 and tuitions 9-12;
  - Operates PreK-6 and tuitions 7-12; or
  - Pays tuition for all students grades PreK-12.

**Act 46: Getting to a Preferred Governance Structure**

- **Act 46 Includes incentives...**
  - Grants to fund studies (*more on next slides*)
  - Varying Tax incentives for adopters
  - \$150,000 Transition grants
  - Limits on tax increases
  - Conversion of small school grants to “merger support grants” for qualifying schools
- **AND disincentives...**
  - Imposition of preferred structure
  - Disappearance of small school grants

Study Committees

Act 46 provided funding for two kinds of study committees:

- **Exploratory Study Committees** determine advisability of potential partnerships among districts who fall short of the “preferred governance structure” set forth in Act 46
- **706 Implementation Study Committees** develop articles of agreement that define parameters of newly created SU

Study Committees

Thetford has participated in three Exploratory Study Committees:

- Orange East Supervisory Union (OESU), Blue Mountain Supervisory Union (BMU), and Rivendell
    - Thetford and Rivendell withdrew
  - Norwich, Strafford and Sharon
    - Norwich withdrew, talks have continued with Strafford & Sharon
  - Rivendell – talks continue with them.
- AND**
- Strafford and Sharon are also engaged in a study committee with multiple districts within White River Supervisory Union

### Study Committees

Study Committees are designed to help districts determine their future direction in the context of Act 46 and thereby help them determine "partners" to join them in 706 study committees



### 706 Study Committee Process

- 706 Implementation Study Committee develops a report that includes "Articles of Agreement" that must address the following issues:
  - Names of the school districts the committee considers to be necessary and/or advisable to form the new district
  - Grades that will be operated by the new district
  - A plan for the first year of operation re: transportation, assignment of staff, and curriculum
  - The indebtedness of the member districts that the new district will assume
  - The specific pieces of real property that the union shall acquire, their value, and how the new district will pay for them
  - Allocation of capital and operating expenses

### 706 Study Committee Process

- The Articles of Agreement must also address:
  - Board composition and proportional representation; board shall have no more than 18 members, and each member district shall be entitled to at least one representative
  - Term of office for initial board of directors, which must include staggered terms
  - The date when the union school district proposal will be submitted to the voters
  - The date on which the union school district will begin operating schools and providing educational services
  - Any other matters the committee considers important
  - Merged teacher and staff contracts

### 706 Study Committee Process

- Once the report is complete, it is submitted to proposed member district boards for review and comment and is then sent to the Agency of Education/ State Board of Education (SBE) for approval
- If the SBE approves the report, the proposal goes to the voters on the date established in the report
- If the voters of all member districts approve the proposal, the new district will be created and will be operational on the date specified in the report

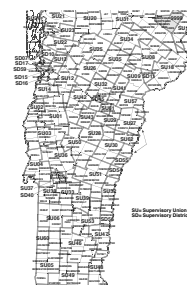
### 706 Study Committee Decision

**Thetford needs to make a decision in the near future about how to proceed because:**

- Orange East Supervisory Union (OESU) has secured a 706 grant to create a Study Committee to create "Oxbow-BMU"
- Sharon and Strafford are expected to make a decision whether to join the White River 706 grant by the end of March

### What Options Does Thetford Have?

Given Thetford's deliberations as part of the OESU study, the Sharon/Strafford study, and discussions with Rivendell, Thetford has identified some options to consider... and needs your input to help make a decision



“Designation” vs. “Choice”

- **Thetford currently designates all its students to Thetford Academy.** This guarantees every child in Thetford may attend Thetford Academy
- **Some options require Thetford to replace “designation” with “choice”:** By moving to a “choice” model, Thetford students would be able to attend schools other than TA but would not be guaranteed admission to TA.

“Designation”

- **Pros:**
  - Every child in the district is guaranteed a spot at the designated school
  - Considerable collaboration between town board and designated school’s board in terms of pedagogy and financial matters
- **Cons:**
  - Attendance at other secondary schools at taxpayer expense only granted through waiver process
  - If a waiver is granted, the town is only permitted to pay up to the average announced union high school tuition, and family of child is required to pay any remaining tuition

“Choice”

- **Pros:**
  - Wide range of educational options from which to choose the best fit for each child
- **Cons:**
  - Receiving school is under no obligation to accept a student
    - Receiving school decides tuition rate, how many students to take, what admission requirements are, and may deny students with special needs because of staffing restrictions or predetermined special ed quotas due to potential increased costs related to these students
  - Sending district has no control or collaboration over budgetary or pedagogical decisions
  - If school budget is rejected by voters, only option is to make cuts to elementary budget
  - Families responsible for transportation

“Side-by-Side” vs. “RED”

- Definitions that pertain to Thetford’s options:
- A **RED** is a merger of four or more districts who operate in the same fashion (e.g. PK-6/Designation or PK-6/Choice)
  - A **“Side-by-side”** is the merger of one or more districts who operate in the same fashion (a “side”) with another merger that provides education for students in grades K-12 (the other “side”).
  - **NOTE:** The K-12 “sides” in any “side-by-side” involving Thetford are either Oxbow-BMU or White River.

Option #1: Merge with Strafford and Form a side-by-side (K-6 Operating/Designation of 1-3 schools 7-12 or Choice 7-12)

- **Benefits:**
  - Possible to retain K-6/Designation
  - SU oversight is “known quantity” (OESU or White River)
  - Strafford is demographic and philosophical match
- **Assumptions:**
  - Strafford would be willing to forego grades 7&8
  - Waiver process modified, if Designation is Chosen
  - Supervisory Union is willing to partner

Option #2: Form a 4-5 Town RED with 7-12 Choice (K-6 Operating)

- **Benefits:**
  - Would be its own Supervisory District
  - Would be able to provide teachers with nearby professional development opportunities
- **Assumptions:**
  - Strafford and Tunbridge would forego grades 7&8
  - The Agency of Education would allow it to be its own Supervisory District.

### Option #3: Merge with Rivendell

- Conversation has just begun, therefore Benefits and Assumptions/Questions have not been determined. The study is ongoing.
- Possible Benefits:
  - Geographically contiguous to share resources & professional development.
  - Potential for expanded educational opportunities

### Option #4: Form an Alternative Structure

Most likely a new Supervisory Union  
(Strafford, Sharon, Thetford, Tunbridge, and/or Rivendell)

- Benefits:
  - Each district would continue to operate in its current configuration
  - Local school board is retained
  - Would create a Supervisory union with towns contiguous to us allowing for nearby professional development opportunities
- Assumptions/Questions:
  - Sharon and Strafford willing to leave current SU
  - Strafford willing to give up Small Schools Grant
  - Rivendell willing to become part of an SU
  - AOE allows creation of a new Supervisory union and supports this plan

### Option #5: Maintain Current Structure

- This would maintain the current K-6 operating/Designation of TA for 7-12 structure.
- No merger with other districts
- Remain in OESU or another SU as a stand-alone district.
- Thetford would continue business as usual
- **HOWEVER:**
  - This will probably not control costs especially if student population continues to decline
  - Thetford may lose the ability to partner with other districts in the future.
  - In 2018, the Secretary of Education would propose a plan for possible realignment of districts that have not already merged, in order to achieve cost control and equitable educational opportunities. This could include being reassigned to a different SU.

### Things to think about...

1. How important is designation?
2. How important is affiliation with new SU as opposed to alignment with Oxbow-BMU or White River?
3. Which option is preferable?
4. Which options are acceptable?
5. Should Thetford continue the Exploratory Study with Rivendell?

## QUESTIONS



## SURVEY

In an effort to gather as much input as possible from the community we ask that you take a quick survey to help inform the Board's work moving forward.

Survey open from:  
8pm March 22<sup>nd</sup> - 8pm March 29<sup>th</sup>

Survey available at:  
<http://goo.gl/forms/NNqPOMDJAK>

Please one survey entry per community member.

## POLL

We'd also like to do a quick snapshot poll in order to hear from each individual present tonight. Please visit a board member to receive 4 stickers to participate. Thetford Community members only please.

Please place your stickers on the Option Posters as follows:

- GREEN = This option is the most appealing. (My 1<sup>st</sup> choice)
- YELLOW = This option is acceptable. (My 2<sup>nd</sup> choice)
- RED = This option is absolutely unacceptable. (My last choice)
- BLUE = Place your sticker on the choice vs. designation continuum to share your preference on choice vs. designation.