

Waitsfield

Backdrop/Current Challenges:

- Declining enrollment has resulted in small class year cohorts and shrinking classroom sizes at all levels.
- Fiscal Year 2016-2017 budget included eliminating 1.0 FTE special educator, previously planned building maintenance project, technology upgrades, and contingency funds.
- Due to drop in equalized pupils a 7.1% budget decrease still resulted in an educational tax rate increase of 2.9% for Waitsfield. Original tax increase would have been 4.3% had the legislature not softened the penalties of the Allowable Growth Provision (AGP) of Act 46.
- Over the past 5 years per pupil spending at Harwood has increased over 30%.
- Harwood met the requirements of the AGP for FY 2016-2017 through early retirement buyouts and program cuts.
- Enrollment projections show continued decline. School budgets, 75% of which are salaries and benefits, continue to grow when level serviced.

Merger Would Offer:

- Tax incentives for the first 4 or 5 years, transition facilitation grant, small schools grants would become merger support grants when appropriate, and hold harmless on declining student enrollment.
- During years in which incentives applied to tax rate, the homestead tax rate growth for each town will be limited to 5%.
- Small schools closure protection.
- Exemption from whatever cost containment measure the legislature puts in place for FY 2017-2018.
- One budget spread across a greater number of taxpayers would provide a more stable tax rate for everyone. No one town would have to worry about unforeseen expenses creating spikes in the tax rate.
- Short term period of tax relief created by the incentives would allow period in which to achieve efficiencies in more careful and well thought out manner.
- Cost efficiencies would allow for some savings to be reinvested into the high school or elsewhere.
- Continued status of 501c3 organizations and their funds, protecting local spending that does not result in inequities.
- Need for fewer board members.
- Possibilities: merged middle schools, school choice, greater equity, magnet schools and academies, classroom sizes which meet recommendations and larger age cohort groups, resource sharing, cost shifting, and new programming.

Failure to Merge Might Result In:

- Mandated merger by Vermont Agency of Education after July 1, 2019, which will come with no incentives or transition grant, and a loss of the small schools grant and hold harmless on declining student enrollment.
- Increasing difficulties funding level service budgets and performing regular building maintenance and upkeep.
- Continued prevalence of micro-classrooms with between 8 and 11 students.
- Having to choose between maintaining classroom sizes that do not meet Vermont Quality Standards or reconfiguring them to include three or four grades in one room. The latter can create social and behavioral issues and instructional challenges, which could lead to students not achieving desired learning outcomes.
- Programmatic cuts aimed at limiting budget growth.