

Senate Ed Committee: Allowable Growth Testimony
January 12, 2016
as presented by : June Sargent
Principal, Vergennes Union Elementary School

Good afternoon Senators,

My name is June Sargent. This is my 30th continuous year in education, having taught 18 years in history and Latin, and for the past 12 years serving as a Principal. I have worked in high schools as small as 150 students to as large as nearly a 1000 students in grades 7-12. I also served for 9 nine years on the Executive Council for the Vermont Principals' Association, with 2 of them as its President. For the past 4 years, I have been the Principal of Vergennes Union Elementary School which currently has 252 students Kindergarten through 6th grade, and serves the communities of Vergennes, Waltham and Panton in Addison County.

These jobs have allowed me to work in 5 schools in 2 different counties throughout my career, and to visit many more schools in Vermont. While on the Executive Council, I also have had many conversations with administrators across the nation as to what is working in their schools and states, and what issues they face regularly as they work to provide a quality education for their students. For the record, I want to state that I support your efforts at reducing education spending across the state and for Act 46's efforts to promote unification among our schools. These efforts are worth the arduous and monumental work that went into them.

To begin my remarks though regarding the impact of the Allowable Growth Rates set by Act 46, I need to tell you about the demographics of my school to better understand both the school and district I represent today. We have a population of children where generally 50% qualify for free or reduced meals each year. Last year, we had 271 students, and of those, 17% received Special Education services, 27% received supplemental Math and/or Literacy Instruction to help them overcome gaps in learning and skill deficiencies compared to their grade level peers, 13% received mental health services from embedded School-based Clinicians from the Counseling Service of Addison County to address emotional, social and/or behavioral issues, and 1% of our population received English Language Learner services. In addition, we have a large student turnover rate more than likely caused by several factors, the availability of low-income housing in Vergennes and the John Graham homeless shelter, as well as employees of a large international industrial center where engineers (and their families) come and go for special projects and sometimes who are only in the community for a year or less. Those factors alone make it extremely difficult to create budgets almost a year in advance of when they will be implemented. For example, last year 10 students moved in between October and early December, with 8 of them receiving special education services. For an average sized elementary school, you can understand that we clearly have our challenges especially as it pertains to fiscal planning.

This year, we are operating on a per pupil spending rate of \$13,752.87. Under Act 60, our spending limit was a little over \$17,000 and we worked very hard to stay under that threshold so that our taxpayers were not penalized. However, now under Act

46, the Allowable Growth Rate has set our per pupil spending rate at \$14,365.08 just to maintain level budgeting, which does not mean level programming. Due to increases in the health insurance rate at 7.9%, teacher salary increases negotiated at 3.5% and support staff salaries recently ratified at 5.75%, we automatically are forced to either reduce programming and/or staffing or face a tax penalty. If we were to create a level program budget without making staffing or programming reductions, we would already be \$307 per equalized pupil over the Allowable Growth Rate.

With this in mind, we have been struggling to determine if we should reduce our supplemental math services which were just added last year to address continuing needs in that content area. This new math lab model has served 73 students this fall for an average of 9-10 weeks, but it is funded locally. Our literacy lab has served 68 students in the same time period but is not in danger of being eliminated because it is funded through federal monies. We are also considering delaying a much needed roofing project to replace aging asphalt shingles over the main section of the school for another year until 2 previous bonds have been paid off, rather than adding the cost for repair to the budget for next year. Needless to say, many cuts have been proposed for operational supplies and maintenance so as to try and limit the impact on programs and services. Also considered were cuts to all field trips and both extracurricular athletic programs, and eliminating the receptionist position, who is responsible for hiring substitutes, daily attendance, and documenting how and where each of our 250+ students go at the end of the school day, which is a major safety concern if we are unable to account for our children each afternoon. Another reduction that could

potentially affect children's safety is the elimination of one of the 2 crossing guard positions in our budget.

Our local high school faces much more draconian measures to try and stay within the spending limit imposed by the Allowable Growth Rate. Despite making reductions in their operational costs and supplies as well, they are anticipating over \$800,000 less in revenues as well as the mainstream block grant being reduced due to declining enrollment. This fiscal storm has pushed their per pupil expenditure above the penalty level of Act. 46. For the first time in many years, they will be forced to have students covered in study hall rather than attend actual classes as there may not be enough teachers for a wide variety of elective classes. They also have considered elimination of their entire athletic program, reduction to the choral program, and eliminating the assistant principal position in a school of 485 students. Unwilling to devastate programs for students and the communities in which they live, and make the 1.2 million dollar reduction to fall within the spending cap, their school board decided last night to approve a budget that was slightly below a level program budget, but that is considerably over the spending cap. If you have further questions about the impact of the Allowable Growth Rate at Vergennes Union High School, Principal Stephanie Taylor would welcome questions. She can be reached at 877-2938 ext. 205.

As for the elementary school, we are faced with \$223,000 less this year in revenues with reductions to our mainstream block grant, our special education reimbursements from both extraordinary costs and the regular special education revenues, and a reduction in the EEE grant that comes to our Supervisory Union. Next

year our population is predicted right now to rise another 10 students based on Kindergarten enrollment projections and the change caused by the small 6th grade class moving on to the local high school. However, our equalized per pupil amount is set to only increase 0.46, which will be an insignificant amount when it comes to the mainstream block grant.

Already we are at the threshold regarding class sizes with 2 teachers per grade level, and class sizes in Kindergarten through 5th grade ranging from 18-23 students per classroom. We have been working very hard to contain our educational spending over the past 4 years while still meeting the Education Quality Standards and best practices recommended with content instruction and in the Unified Arts program, and that also address the high social, emotional, behavioral, and health challenges faced by our students. We seek federal, state, and local grants whenever possible, and have qualified for Title I funding to provide 3 supplemental Literacy teachers at the school, a 21st Century grant that funds a broad enriching and remedial afterschool program, and summer services supported also by other federal monies. In addition, we have created local collaborative opportunities with grants given to the Counseling Service of Addison County and the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum with whom we work as partners to provide both mental health and educational opportunities for our students. We also are a school that receives support from the Everybody Wins VT! reading mentorship program, where students are paired with adults from the community to build enthusiasm for reading and school attendance. Lastly, we have received for the past 4 years as

well, a Fresh Fruit and Veggie grant that provides free healthy snacks to all students 2-3 days a week and that promotes making healthy and nutritious life choices.

We consider ourselves very fortunate for all of these opportunities to help overcome the many challenges faced by our students, but at the heart of our school is the quality of the education they receive each day and the resources that are available to them as they continue to learn and grow. The Allowable Growth Rate spending cap seriously jeopardizes our main educational program, and sets limits that did not take into account mandatory salary and benefit rate increases. I urge you to repeal that portion of Act 46 until further study can be done as to what would be reasonable spending limits, on hopefully unified school districts that have been consolidated and are more able to work on reducing educational expenses, which as a larger entity would have a less detrimental impact on individual schools.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony, and best wishes as you endeavor to bring about unification in Vermont schools.