

Town of Groton, Vermont – Special Select Board Minutes of June 18, 2018 (approved)

Select Board Members in Attendance: Wade Johnson, Sr., Deborah Jurist and Aaron Smith

Attendance for the Meeting: See attached Attendance Sheet

Wade Johnson opened the meeting at 6:30 PM.

Brent Abare introduced attorney David Kelley who is a lawyer with Alliance Vermont and a member of the Hazen Union School Board, and has many years of experience working with educational law. He is also a School Board member

David Kelley started out by saying that in his opinion BMU is part of Orange East Supervisory Union (OESU) NOW and there is no going back. He suggested that BMU has two choices, let the high school be absorbed by Oxbow or vote to become school choice towns. The three towns need to work together with the town Select Boards and School Board members and they need to work fast. He was clear that his choice would be to go to school choice for either grades 7-12 or 9-12 this would be the only arrangement in which the district would have any control over their own money. As the high school gets absorbed by Oxbow the power of all three towns will dissipate until it disappears.

A question was asked about how school choice worked. Mr. Kelley started out by explaining that if school choice were to be voted in by the three towns, adoption would need to be put out for at least one year and up to 2 years in order to honor contracts. The base amount of cost per student is shared across the State of Vermont.

The way the law works in Vermont is that, each student would get a voucher. The student would have a choice of what school he or she wanted to go to. Any school can take tuition students, as BMU does now for example. The state education fund would pay for the voucher as it currently subsidizes the cost of education at BMU through state equalization. Some schools/towns, will actually negotiate with school choice towns, about tuition cost and providing transportation, in order for their school to be more attractive to the potential students. One advantage to becoming a tuitioning town; is that families gravitate to towns that tuition their students out, bringing resources and vitality with them.

Mr. Kelley stated that if school choice is what the three towns want, they need to work fast. If the School Board does not want to have a vote for school choice, the three towns then could each get a petition with 5% of their voters to have a vote.

David Kelley predicted that the high school at BMU will be gone in 2-3 years. He reiterated that there needs to be respect for the people that have careers and contracts at the school and the best way to do this is to push the adoption of school choice for the high school out for one to two years.

He said, he can't stress enough for the School Boards and Select Boards to talk together to discuss all possibilities.

David Kelley stressed again, once you are locked in with OESU, you don't control the path you go on. The Orange East Supervisory Union can embrace many government structures that would leave BMU towns out of power. One thing that the state wanted to do with Act 46 was to get rid of the Vermont Local School Boards.

Mr. Kelley, said about 6 schools have chosen to opt for school choice since the beginning of Act 46. Nobody expected schools to do that when Act 46 was started.

The number of students in the State of Vermont has gone down. Twenty-five years ago, there were 120,000 students, now there are only 70,000 students.

Brent Abare said one advantage of school choice is that you will avoid the Act 46 decision by the Secretary of State, and if you decided you don't like it, you can reverse it. If the school merges with Oxbow, it cannot be reversed.

David Kelley said there are currently 91 tuition towns in Vermont and that towns have been tuitioning students out for over 100 years. Only 2-3 towns have ever given it up.

David Kelley is going to give us a list of the six towns that have gone to school choice since the beginning of Act 46 so that we can reach out to them.

David Kelley said that he believes the opportunity to go to CCSU is lost. This would have been the best option to keep the school as it is. The school has already been assigned to OESU. To go to school choice, the community needs to work together and fast. A vote needs to be warned as soon as possible.

David Kelley was asked what the disadvantages of school choice are. He said the cost of transportation could go up and that there could be an increase in cost. The voucher system described before could be adopted, keeping the cost at the state average.

David Kelley listed some other states in which small town schools were consolidated. In the absence of school choice, people did not move to them because there was not a local school.

Deborah Jurist made a motion to adjourn at 8:05 PM, Aaron seconded, motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Johnson
SB Secretary

Wade Johnson, Sr., Chair

Deborah Jurist

Aaron Smith