

**Windham Central Supervisory Union**  
**Alternative Governance Structure Proposal**  
**For Windham Elementary School District**

For Review by Vermont State Board of Education - December 2017

**Executive Summary**

The Windham Elementary School District (WESD) is proposing to establish an Alternative Governance Structure as defined in Act 46, Sec. 9 (2015). Factors relating to Windham's geographic isolation from the other towns in the Windham Central Supervisory Union (WCSU) and its disparity with other schools in capital debt make it a prime candidate for maintaining its own School Board and budget and not practicable for merger.

What follows is an exhaustive self-evaluation and presentation of what has been or will be done to meet or exceed the five goals of Act 46. Also included is a rationale regarding why the "preferred structure" set out in Act 46 is not the best model for the WESD or in the best interests of Windham students.

The WESD has worked for years as a part of the WCSU to maximize operational efficiencies by sharing staff who work at more than one school in the SU, special education services, and staff development opportunities. It should be noted that Windham's membership in the Leland and Gray Union High School District has limited our ability to find other partners with whom to have discussions.

**Background, Process, and Additional Information**

**Background** - Windham is a small mountain-top community in southern Vermont with a population in 2010 of 419 people according to City-Data.com. According to the same source, the population has increased by 27.7% since the 2000 census. The town is situated at the top of Windham Hill, accessed only by steep and/or dirt roads. The Windham Elementary School (WES) sits at an elevation of 1,712 ft. To travel to any of the other schools in the WCSU, one needs to go through West Townshend, which sits at 600 feet in elevation. The Jamaica Elementary School (WES) is at 691 feet in elevation and the Townshend Elementary School is at 583 feet in elevation. All of this data has been procured from the US Geological Survey Digital Elevation Model. Please see map in the front cover of the Master Copy or online at [www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/](http://www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/).

**Process** – Shortly after the passage of Act 46, the WCSU board, made up of board members from all of the operating districts within the Supervisory Union, began investigating the Union's options under Act 46 for the various districts. Throughout the summer of 2015, the WCSU held several meetings with discussions regarding the possibilities for consolidation and mergers of districts within the Union. WESD was limited in its ability to engage in partnerships because of its membership in the Leland and Gray Union High School Union.

The School Directors of Windham Elementary School actively participated in the WCSU Act 46 Study Committee. We made suggestions that would have given us a little more comfort regarding the final proposal, one of which was accepted, a couple of others rejected.

On Town Meeting Day, the merger proposal was rejected by the voters of the Town of Windham but ultimately resulted in the West River Modified Unified Union School District (WRMUUSD). After the Windham Town Meeting rejection, the School Directors met on March 10, 2017 and voted to form a Local Act 46 Study Committee. The intent was for the Local Act 46 Study Committee to meet at least monthly, directly after the regular WES School Board meetings, which usually occur on the first Monday of every month unless otherwise scheduled (see Appendix A – Section 1 for meeting agendas and minutes).

On March 20, 2017, the decision of the Committee was to pursue an Alternative Governance Structure that would allow WESD to retain its own School Board and budget. The Local Act 46 Study Committee discussed next steps and how to do community engagement and outreach.

While the Town Meeting vote (74-66) resulted in a vote margin of eight votes, ensuing conversations with townspeople indicated that voters may not have been entirely clear on what a vote of support for the merger meant in regards to the elimination of the local School Board and budget. It was determined that a survey of voters might help clarify community understanding.

On April 3, a Survey Subcommittee was formed to develop survey questions and facilitate the distribution of the resulting survey. The Survey Subcommittee worked for several months to develop survey questions that would gauge Windham residents' thoughts and sentiments regarding the school. A Survey Roll-out Brunch was advertised via email, word-of-mouth, and a sandwich board in front of the school, and was held on Sept. 30, 2017, at 10 AM at the WES. Approximately, 33 people attended the brunch and, subsequently, 290 surveys were mailed and hand-delivered.

A total of 88 surveys were returned, representing an impressive 30% response rate (see Appendix B for Survey Results). Results overwhelmingly supported maintaining our current level of budgetary transparency as afforded by the school budget report and discussion at Town Meeting; maintaining our current level of control of the cost of educating Windham's children as afforded by the school budget report, discussion, and vote at Town Meeting; and keeping Windham's local, community-based School Board. Strong support was shown for the quality of education and opportunities for Windham students, but it was also indicated that some folks, because they don't have much interaction with the WES, were not aware of the opportunities afforded to the students.

The top three issues/priorities regarding the WES were, in order, keeping quality of education high, keeping decision-making about our school at the local/town level, and keeping the K-6<sup>th</sup> grade students attending Windham School close to home. The survey was extremely valuable because we were also able to get feedback on how people would like to get information about the school, how well the School Board was doing in regards to community relations, and a basic understanding of the demographics of the town.

On Sept. 27, 2017 at the WCSU Board and Executive Committee meeting, a motion was made that the WCSU support the Towns of Stratton and Windham in what path they might take regarding an Act 46 Alternative Governance Structure proposal. The motion carried on a strong 15-3 vote. Members of both, the WRMUUSD and the River Valleys Unified School District, as

well as Marlboro School District were present and voting. Minutes for this meeting are included in Appendix A – Section 2; see page 4 for the aforementioned vote.

The Local Act 46 Study Committee has continued to meet and the Survey Subcommittee members have worked on various aspects of the proposal you see before you.

**Additional Considerations Regarding Geographic Isolation** - Given the elevation data cited above, it is clear that Windham is the only mountain town in the Leland and Gray High School Union. Transportation to and from WES is critically important to the children in Windham. WES owns its own bus and hires its own driver. Each year, the School Board is responsible for planning the school bus route to ensure that all students get the best, safest service we can reasonably provide. Considerable time is spent, usually at our August meeting, planning the school bus route with the bus driver. Frequently, during the school year adjustments have to be made to accommodate our families and the Windham School Board is able to do this in a nimble way.

Over the years, the School Board has investigated other options such as contracting bus service with established transportation providers or leasing a bus and hiring our own driver. These other options have always proven to be significantly more expensive primarily due to Windham's geographic location. For the last several years, we have requested and received a Transportation Services Waiver from the Agency of Education. Please see reports from our current bus driver, Kord Scott, who is also a Select Board member and Windham Road Commissioner in Appendix A – Section 4. These are must-read documents.

Parental involvement with a child's education is widely recognized to be extremely important to a child's ultimate success. It is rare when Windham School Board Meetings do not include community members and/or parents and we welcome that attendance. Merging with the WRMUUSD would most likely require parents and community members who want to participate in Board meetings to travel to a central location a great distance away under sometimes less than optimal road conditions at a time when they would most likely be putting their children to bed.

Local School Board meetings are held at a time and place where most parents can attend if they so desire. It has been suggested that rather than have the "merged" meetings in one central location, such as Townshend where the WCSU meetings are held, the meetings might move around to the member towns. That would not improve the situation for Windham parents and community members. Any other town in the Leland and Gray Union High School district is of equal or greater distance away from that central location and all require a trip down Windham Hill Road.

On page 30 of his document dated June 30, 2017, *Southern Vermont Regional Governance Analysis – Route 100 Corridor*, Daniel M. French, Ed.D., states "Having lived in arguably some of the most remote areas in the Northeast Kingdom for 15 years, I would have to say the schools in the WCSU and WSSU are more isolated from each other than many in the Kingdom due to the mountainous terrain, a significant variable when considering any changes to the governance structure." (see Appendix C – Section 2 of the Master Copy for the full text. In the abbreviated version, only the cited page appears. This document can also be seen at [www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/](http://www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/)).

Due to our distance from other elementary schools in the SU (realistically a trip to either Jamaica or Townshend takes 20 minutes or more one way in a school bus on a good day), collaboration with other schools, while welcome, would potentially be limited. In fact, over the years due to weather conditions, we have had to adjust our school bus routes in order to ensure that students were getting their required time in school. Factoring 40 minutes of travel time into our daily schedule to participate with other schools could be a significant deterrent.

**The Windham School Board requests that before any decision is made regarding our proposal, the State Board of Education and members of the Agency of Education travel to Windham to witness first-hand, the geographic isolation challenges we face.** Drawing lines on a map does not begin to illustrate a clear picture of the actual road conditions and elevation factors with which we must contend. The safety and welfare of our children is our primary concern and transporting high school students to Leland and Gray is significantly less daunting than transporting young children down a sometimes treacherous hill.

One cannot overstate the dangerous road conditions on Windham Hill Road due to steepness and a sharp curve at the bottom of the hill. In recent years, a large moving truck lost its brakes, did not make the curve, and careened off the road at the bottom of the hill, traveling through a neighbor's yard, and out across Route 30, ending up right next to the West Townshend Country Store. On days when it is snowing and/or icy, vehicles will regularly lose traction at the bottom of the hill and slide out onto Route 30. One Windham resident, on a good day, witnessed a car traveling too fast, hit the bottom curve with its right wheels in the ditch, go up on those two wheels, hit the bottom of the hill, righting the vehicle, uncontrolledly crossing Route 30. We may try to include a photo of the bottom of Windham Hill but you have to see it for yourself; words and pictures just don't do it justice. This school bus route is not for the faint of heart.

One of our current School Board members was the full-time bus driver for several years and she reports hair-raising moments during the fall and winter months when road conditions were extremely dangerous. Imagine sliding sideways across both lanes of traffic in a full-sized school bus down a steep hill on a two-lane road due to black ice! Windham Hill and its inherent road conditions are not expected to change and with increased extreme weather events will probably get worse.

In fact, the weather conditions in Windham, in general, can be significantly different than those in Townshend and/or Jamaica – there seems to be a microclimate in Windham due to its elevation (the center of town sits at just under 2,000 feet in elevation). That aforementioned current School Board member/former bus driver can remember a time when there was a raging snow storm in Windham and it was raining in Townshend. When she called Leland and Gray Union High School to say that she would have to come for the middle/high school students early or not at all, they thought she was crazy but complied with the request.

These potential weather conditions could be an additional deterrent for parents who might want to attend School Board meetings. One of our active school families lives four to five miles in the other direction from the school so attendance at a “merged” School Board meeting would require even more potentially dangerous travel in order to participate.

We feel strongly that parental involvement is an important aspect of a child's education and creating barriers to that involvement and participation is not conducive to a convenient educational experience.

**Equity and Quality of Educational Opportunities** - As a result of our membership in the WCSU, we feel that there is substantial equity amongst all member schools. While some differences exist, the basic requirements and educational standards are met entirely.

WES, because of its size, does have some unique opportunities that we feel enhance the educational experience for our students. We will outline some of those opportunities below but want to emphasize that we are delighted to share these opportunities with children from other school districts. Our request to form an Alternative Governance Structure does not prohibit us from continuing to work collaboratively within the WCSU with other school districts and we welcome that possibility.

Many of the special opportunities we are able to provide come as a result of a close relationship between School Board members and the larger community, emphasizing the need to maintain our local School Board.

One of the highlights of our program is a relationship with Meadows Bee Farm in Windham. A former School Board member who works at Meadows Bee Farm was able to arrange with the owner, Leigh Merinoff, a weekly program in which WES students go to the farm in the morning, before school starts, to learn about agriculture, in particular, how to milk a cow, tend bee hives, and shear sheep. The older children have also been lucky enough to watch lambs being born. It is believed that having experienced this program for several years, the students could now do the chores by themselves! When sheep shearing occurs, our school is small enough that we can all travel to the farm by car to witness the event. They have also learned carding, one of the steps in turning wool fiber into useful finished products.

Ms. Merinoff has been kind enough to purchase bee-keeping suits for all the children so that they can learn about bees and the importance of pollinators in our world. As our Teaching Principal, Mickey Parker-Jennings says, "This provides the students with a chance to see a profession they will not likely ever get another chance to view. In this day and age when we are attempting to build a relationship and connection between schools and communities, these opportunities are priceless." Please see Appendix D – Section 2 for a letter from Leigh Merinoff.

Our Primary teacher, Sally Newton, who attended WES when it was one of two schools in Windham, created a school garden 23 years ago when she started teaching in Windham. Long before the Vermont Farm to School Program was developed, we've had a vegetable garden that is planted in the spring, tended in the summer by Sally and students who would like to help, and harvested in the fall. Vegetables are used at the school for snacks and other meals. The children have also planted crops at the Meadows Bee Farm greenhouse and gone back to grind corn and make corn cakes from it. One of the employees at Meadows Bee Farm has encouraged the children to taste various root crops, which encourages adventurous eating habits and better nutrition – one of the goals of the Farm to School Program.

Sally also provides after-school ukulele lessons for any child who would like to participate. This includes children who are home-schooled and who are from other towns. The ukuleles are borrowed from Leland and Gray thanks to their willingness to collaborate. Now many of the students own their own ukulele, which they've received as holiday and birthday gifts. Not only does this program provide musical instruction, it gives the children the self-confidence and ability to get up in front of an audience to perform.

The children regularly perform at the Windham Harvest Supper, Valley Cares in Townshend, and the weekly West River Community Project Pizza Night. They have made special appearances at former Superintendent Steven John's retirement party at the River Garden in Brattleboro and at the Ukulele Extravaganza in Jamaica. In fact, a couple of times Sally couldn't attend the event and asked a parent to supervise, but without any prompting, the children got up, organized themselves, and performed beautifully with grace and confidence.

Twice a year, weather and road conditions permitting, the children travel down to sing and play music for the residents at Valley Cares, an assisted living facility in Townshend. One of our student's mothers works at Valley Cares and she shared the effect that the children's holiday performance had on the residents. It is a chance for our students to give back and bring joy to some of our elderly community members. Please see Appendix D – Section 2 for a copy of the email from Brigett Coolbeth.

In the spring, Sally, (who frequently bicycles to work from her home in W. Townshend) is in charge of the after-school walking and running club. Students are encouraged to participate in this positive activity that gets them outdoors, moving and establishing healthy life-style habits. In the past the students have organized Walk-a-Thon Fundraisers for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, as well as for a local child who was badly injured in an accident. More recently the children, perhaps because of their greater understanding of the importance of agriculture, have chosen to raise the money for Heifer International. It is also customary for the school year to start off with a team-building hike – this year it was up Putney Mountain.

Several years ago, we became aware of the fact that our students were not enthusiastic about attending art class, which seemed unusual. With many artistically-talented people living in Windham, we decided to create our own art program in order to provide a richer experience for the children. Now community and School Board members come into the school to teach subjects as varied as weaving, spinning, felting, papermaking, and zentangle, just to name a few. The spinning and weaving classes build on the work done at Meadows Bee Farm regarding wool fiber.

A few months of the year, we also have the opportunity to use a nearby ceramics studio offered by Leigh Merinoff where the students are exposed to working with clay, glazes, pottery wheels, and kilns. The children have learned different pottery construction methods and made many wonderful pottery creations.

Our former principal, Roberta Stradling, who is also an art teacher has been coming to the school on a part-time basis to teach the children color theory and painting skills.

Christine Mix did a residency at WES that incorporated art and local history. Community members Paul Wyman, Dave Crittenden, Susan Persa, and Walter Woodruff came to talk with the students about what life was like in Windham in the “old days”. School Board Chair, Carolyn Partridge, visited with the students at the Windham Meeting House to talk about the history of the building, which was raised in 1802; a subject she learned a lot about when she wrote a Windham bicentennial celebration booklet in 1995.

Over the years, we have also been very fortunate to have sisters Cate Kelley and Sarah Peck of West Windham do residencies in which two plays were produced by the students. Both centered on science, the environment, and social consciousness. The more recent production concerned pollinators, and their importance to the environment and our food system. Students wrote the play, designed and constructed the set, learned their lines, and played and sang music as part of the production. They performed multiple shows to standing-room-only audiences with parents, grandparents, and community members in attendance.

In 2008, students went up to the Lemay Farm where Milford Chase, now deceased, taught them how to plant potatoes. They then went back in the fall to harvest the crop. This was a special opportunity to spend time with an “old-timer”, hear stories, and learn from his wisdom. The students learned entrepreneurship by selling potatoes to community members and cooking up and serving potatoes at the school. Later, the students produced a potato life-cycle play.

For several years, we have participated in the Early Stages program at the Weston Playhouse. Students learn stagecraft and how to write and produce plays. The program directors now give Windham a 50% discount because they like and appreciate our students so much and want us back.

STARBASE Youth Program is another educational opportunity we offer the students at WES. It is a non-residential American military educational program for students (grades K-12) that provides them with real-world applications of math and science. It was created in 1991 through a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. Run by the US Department of Defense, it includes hands-on activities, some direct instruction, lots of great experiments, and plenty of interaction with students from other schools in other supervisory unions. It is held at the Rutland Vermont Army Reserve Center. We used to be the only school in our SU to participate but now there are two other schools from our SU who join us there.

One very special experience occurred in 1996 when a current School Board member who was active politically asked Pete Seeger to play a benefit concert in Brattleboro. He was staying at her home and as a special favor she asked if he would visit WES. He graciously agreed and spent time telling stories and playing music for the children. One highlight of his visit was when he told the students that he was going to play a song that they might not know but he would teach them the words. The song was called “Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” and to his delight and surprise, they already knew it. Sally Newton, who on a daily basis brings music to the lives of our students, played along with him for, what made for all of us, a very memorable moment.

It should be noted that in, at least, two instances, children have come to WES with a special ed. label and graduated without it. We believe that the special, caring attention that students get at WES has a direct effect on this and is a value that can't be easily measured. The WESD is

committed to continuing the development of different approaches to tailoring programs to meet the needs of all students and preventing the need for special education services.

The opportunities and activities described above are strong evidence of some of the unique programs offered to WES students despite (or due to) our geographical isolation and small size. The School Board is attuned to the talent in this small community, which enables them to invite adults to share their knowledge and skills with the children. Members of the community volunteer to participate in both during and after school programs. Losing our three-person School Board would be a loss to both the children and the residents of our community.

Many graduates of WES have gone on to great success and productiveness in their lives. It should be noted that despite our small size and the fact that we don't have graduates every year, two out of the last five years, the Valedictorian at Leland and Gray Union High School has been a Windham student.

While a methodical census has not been done, we know that our students have gone on to become electrical engineers, electricians, property management/landscapers, very accomplished freelance photographers, and veterinarians. One of our graduates is an OSHA certified, safety inspector for Three Phase Line Construction, Inc., a company with projects in all areas of electrical distribution, substation, transmission, and communication work. Another is now Director of Portfolio Strategies for the Virginia Retirement System overseeing a \$75 billion portfolio with 650,000 beneficiaries.

Our true goal, however, is not that everyone should end up a millionaire but that they lead productive, happy lives making a living doing something they truly love.

**Efficiency and Sustainability** – Membership in the WCSU promotes substantial efficiencies. In fact, many of the goals of Act 46 were already being met at the WCSU with shared teachers, special education services, and group buying strategies.

Merging with other members in the SU will not promote any additional savings for WESD and may actually cost more. For instance, discussions are now going on regarding the hiring of a Director of Facilities, Transportation, and Security for the new WRMUUSD at a cost of \$100,000 (salary and benefits) per year. The three Windham School Board members provide these services as part of their normal duties for which they are paid \$750 each per year for a total of \$2,250. Windham's share of that position would be significantly more for what we are doing already. As part of these discussions, Windham has made it clear that we do not want to participate in this and that it should be considered part of the Agency Fee, which is how WCSU members currently pay for their share of the physical education and music teachers, for instance.

In terms of sustainability WES has an exemplary track record. Our Primary Room teacher, Sally Newton, has worked at WES for 23 years. Our Secondary Room teacher/Principal, Mickey Parker-Jennings, has worked at WES for 14 years. Both have indicated their desire to stay at the school, though Sally is approaching a time when she might want to retire. We have heard of someone who would be interested in working at WES if and when a position becomes available.

The School Board has always had three members and for the last 35 years or so, no one can remember a vacancy. While Windham is a very small town, there has always been strong interest in the school. The Windham School Board runs extremely efficiently and collaboratively. A letter to that effect from WCSU Superintendent William Anton is included in Appendix A- Section 3.

**Transparency and Accountability** – Years ago, the WES budget was reported in the Town Report on essentially one page. Windham residents indicated that they wanted more information about school spending so, in response, the Windham School Board gladly broke out more of the line items. This was before all of the additional reporting requirements of Acts 60/68 and ensuing legislation. The Windham School Board strongly supports transparency and accountability, which was also strongly supported by the community in answer to one of the questions on our Local Act 46 Study Committee Survey.

**Eighty-four percent of those answering the question valued maintaining our current level of budgetary transparency as afforded by the school budget report and discussion at Town Meeting. Merging our relatively small budget with those of three other elementary schools and the high school would make it virtually impossible to decipher what was being spent on the Windham School and what Windham taxpayers were paying for. This is directly contrary to the Act 46 goal of increased transparency and accountability.**

**On the same survey, eighty percent valued maintaining the current level of control of the cost of educating Windham’s children as afforded by the school budget report, discussion, and vote at Town Meeting.**

**Additional Local Goals** – Several years ago, UVM sponsored a summit on the topic of education for legislators before the beginning of the Legislative Session. One of the speakers was Tony Wagner from the Harvard School of Education. He had an inspiring message that included his list of Seven Survival Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They include critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurship; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination. He also talked at some length about the “F” word – failure – and the importance of allowing students the room to take risks and fail.

A member of that audience was WES School Board Chair, Carolyn Partridge, who also serves in the Vermont Legislature. At the time she observed that WES was already fulfilling a significant percentage of what Tony Wagner was suggesting as a winning strategy in education. Increasing our focus on these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, while adhering to State requirements, will strengthen the educational opportunities offered at WES and better prepare our children for the future. We have included in Appendix D – Section 1 the presentations that our three most recent graduates gave as part of our graduation celebration. They embody at least four of the seven skills noted above. The three young women pay tribute to their teachers, families, friends, and school in a heart-warming, sometimes humorous, and creative way.

As education changes to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we believe that Windham should be considered a model for other schools in Vermont.

## **Proposed Governance Structure**

The Windham School District wishes to remain an independent town school district working within the WCSU with our neighbors to better meet the goals of Act 46. Given all of the details outlined above, we believe that by maintaining our own School Board and budget, we can better provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities offered to our children and other children in the SU.

Our goal is for students to achieve or exceed the State's Education Quality Standards adopted as rules by the State Board of Education at the direction of the General Assembly. Through continued participation with the WCSU, we can maximize operational efficiencies to the best of our abilities given our geographic isolation. Transparency and accountability are significantly enhanced if we maintain our own budget as opposed to combining our relatively small budget with those of three other elementary schools and Leland and Gray Union High School. It would be virtually impossible for the taxpayers of Windham to determine what was being spent on our school were we to be merged into the WRMUUSD. Combining our budget would be directly contrary to one of the goals of Act 46. Furthermore, it is rare when our school budget even requires more than a voice vote at Town Meeting and to our knowledge has never been voted down. This is clear evidence of a budget that parents, voters, and taxpayers value. Survey results showed overwhelming support (80%) for maintaining our own local budget.

The Windham Elementary School District is proposing, effective July 1, 2018, an Alternative Governance Structure, in conjunction with the two newly merged districts, as well as the Marlboro School District's "Two-by-Two-by-One Side-by-Side Structure" within the Windham Central Supervisory Union.

The members of the new structure will be as follows:

- West River Modified Unified Union School District: Townshend, Jamaica, Brookline, Newfane, Windham (grades 7 -12 only)
- River Valleys Unified School District: Dover and Wardsboro
- Marlboro School District
- Windham Elementary School District (grades Pre-K – 6)

This proposal, by virtue of the Sept. 27, 2017 WCSU vote, is strongly supported by all of the other constituent members.

## **MEETING ACT 46 GOALS**

### Summary of Proposed Plan

All of the work done in the context of this Act 46 process outlined above has helped bring us to the current proposal. We are confident that the goals of Act 46 can be fulfilled within an Alternative Governance Structure. We believe that this arrangement achieves the following:

1. Allows Windham to continue to support and be supported by the districts in the Windham Central Supervisory Union. Our districts have a long history of interdependence and collaboration. This new arrangement will continue and build on those strengths.
2. Allows Windham to continue its current operation pattern, operating a school for grades K-6 and sending students to Leland and Gray Union High School or other public high schools of their choice.
3. Creates a structure which will support achievement of the specific goals of Act 46 described in detail below.

### **GOAL 1 - EQUITY OF OPPORTUNITY**

- A. In the past, Windham has had its own Pre-K program. In recent years, it has been far more cost-effective to allow students to attend licensed, accredited Pre-K programs of their own choice. With present increased enrollment, it may make economic sense for Windham to have its own Pre-K program again, which would give students access to special services, such as special education, art, music, and physical education.
  - We will explore sharing Pre-K staffing across the WCSU.
  - We will share professional development resources across the WCSU.
- B. Keeping with our longstanding relationship, teachers will continue to benefit from common professional development/teacher collaboration.
  - Teachers across the WCSU will benefit from sharing each school's unique programming
  - Students will benefit from participation in WCSU professional development based on the CIP (Continuous Improvement Plan)
  - Students will benefit from teachers' participation in the WCSU-wide mentoring program for new educators.
- C. Increase opportunities for Windham students within the WCSU through mutual agreement.
  - In as much as possible given our geographic isolation, Windham will actively seek opportunities for sharing administration so students can participate with other schools within the WCSU in sports, theater, music, and arts programming. Windham is also happy to share with other districts our very rich arts programming described earlier in this document.
  - Work with other school districts in the WCSU to develop special events, such as those suggested by Marlboro School, including Science Fairs or Engineering Challenges. As Marlboro indicated, WCSU is a perfect partner for this type of collaboration due to our history of working together and similarly-sized elementary schools.
- D. Develop collaborative programming with other elementary schools beyond the WCSU when practicable. Examples include our participation in the Weston Playhouse Early Stages program and the STARBASE Youth Program in Rutland.
- E. Explore expansion of public middle school choice. Survey results showed strong support for allowing Windham students to attend middle school where they will be attending high school.
- F. Windham students in grades 9-12 continue to take advantage of public school choice to match individual student needs. While most Windham students attend Leland and Gray

Union High School, some students in the northern portion of Windham choose to attend Green Mountain Union High School, which better meets their needs in terms of distance from school.

## **GOAL 2 - ACHIEVE OR EXCEED THE STATE QUALITY STANDARDS**

Windham students will achieve or exceed the State Quality Standards based on:

- Use of the WCSU Curriculum Director to implement standards-based curriculum, supported by professional development.
- Use of Aims Web Plus standards-based assessment tool data used for individualized learning.
- Continued access to the shared teacher substitute pool for consistent instructional quality though due to our geographic isolation, we have had to develop a list of more locally-based substitute teachers who know the students and are familiar with our routine.
- Participation in the Educator Evaluation System that will exist WCSU-wide.
- Use of the WCSU LCAS (Local Common Assessment System) and SBAC to measure and assure student progress toward EQS.
- Continued use of the Special Education Director to strengthen development, oversight, and implementation of IEP's and compliance with IDEA
- Testing – Much of our latest testing is not reportable because of our small numbers and confidentiality concerns. An aggregate of the SBAC tests for third through sixth grade indicates a need for improvement in math. Our challenge is that our third graders are not accustomed to using computers and their scores may be suffering because of it. In fact some of our parents are reluctant to let their children use computers at an early age so we struggle with that reality.

However, an aggregate of recent graduates indicates in language arts that those who made goal were at 89% - the State average is 55%. In math, that same aggregate made goal of 56% - the State average is 43%. This is a good indicator that, while there is always room for improvement, Windham students are doing well above the State average.

The SBAC is new and our students are not used to taking the test. We see this as an opportunity to improve performance and feel confident that when our younger children reach the sixth grade, their scores will have improved significantly. As evidence of past success, we have included the most recent NECAP results that we have available in Appendix A – Section 5.

## **GOAL 3 - MAXIMIZE OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES**

Windham School will share services and personnel within the WCSU, such as music teacher, physical education teacher, nurse, and special education paraprofessionals and services.

Windham will continue to coordinate and collaborate with the WCSU regarding school policies, professional development, and curriculum.

## **GOAL 4 - PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Windham School will promote educational transparency and accountability through

- Participation in the Local Common Assessments System (LCAS) implemented across the WCSU.
- WCSU analysis of SBAC results.
- Windham School Annual Fiscal Audit – [the 2016 Audit is enclosed with this proposal (see Appendix A – Section 6 in the Master Copy or at [www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/](http://www.townofwindhamvt.com/act46agsproposal/) )].
- Continuation of the use of the WCSU-wide standards-based report card.

Windham School will promote budgetary transparency and accountability through the local, open construction of its budget and its presentation, discussion, and vote at the Windham Town Meeting.

It should also be noted that the combined homestead and non-residential taxpayers of the Town of Windham send to the State Education Fund more than twice what we receive for our schools (Windham and Leland and Gray Union High School), income adjustments, and additional credits to the Town. We mention this only because, in the past, there has been a lack of understanding, even on the part of a former Commissioner/Secretary of Education, and we feel it is important that people know we do our part, times two, regarding the education of Vermont's children (see the document from Brad James, Agency of Education in Appendix C – Section 1).

## **GOAL 5 - EDUCATION DELIVERED AT A COST THAT PARENTS, VOTERS AND TAXPAYERS VALUE**

- Windham will achieve this goal based on continued receipt of the Small Schools Grant based on geographic isolation (see section entitled Additional Considerations Regarding Geographic Isolation above).
- The voters of Windham at Town Meeting have passed the annual school budget for decades, mostly on a unanimous voice vote, indicating support of its fiscal responsibility.
- The Windham Town citizens voted 74-66 in favor of maintaining the independence of the Windham School as an Existing District. Subsequent conversations with townspeople indicated that, in some cases, they did not have had a full and complete understanding of what a merger would mean. We conducted an Act 46 Survey, which revealed strong support for maintaining our own local School Board and budget. Please see survey results in Appendix B.

**Our Local Act 46 Study Committee Survey results indicated that:**

- **77% of respondents valued keeping Windham's local, community-based School Board.**
- **84% valued maintaining our current level of budgetary transparency as afforded by the school budget report and discussion at Town Meeting.**

- **80% valued maintaining the current level of control of the cost of educating Windham’s children as afforded by the school budget report, discussion, and vote at Town Meeting.**
- **77% are satisfied with the quality of education and opportunities that Windham students are currently offered.**
- **77% prefer that all hiring and staffing be done on the local level by the Windham School.**

### **Additional Considerations Regarding Small Schools**

**Student to Staff Ratios** – Windham is a very small school with one full-time teacher, one full-time teaching principal, and part-time support staff. Our current student population is fifteen with nine children in Pre-K. We also have support staff and shared teachers for special classes through the WCSU. As mentioned earlier in this document, we created our own art program, which saves money, offers a richer experience to our students, and reduces our student-to-teacher ratio. We have tried very hard to reduce costs and reduce our staff numbers while not negatively impacting our students’ educational opportunities. Several years ago, we eliminated the Librarian position because we had community members reading with the children and we felt that time would be better spent teaching the children computer skills.

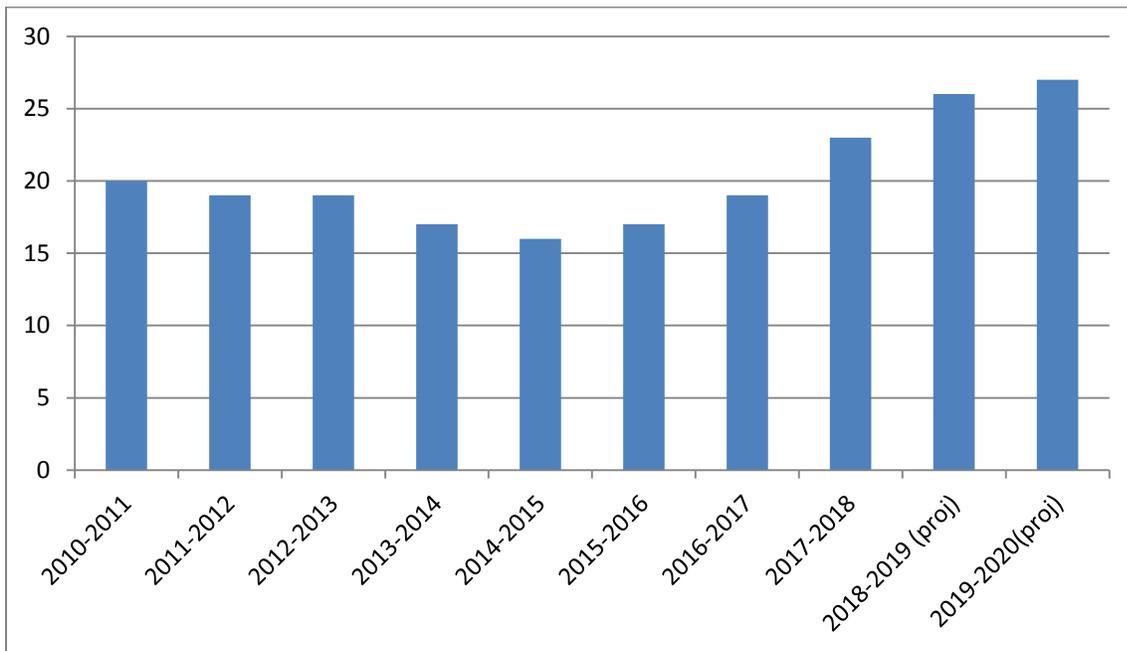
We will continue to look for ways to use our staff in a more cost-effective way. We also see our enrollment increasing in the next few years, which will improve our ratio numbers. We currently have nine Pre-K children enrolled in licensed, approved Pre-K schools and more, young children on the way.

We do have an overarching concern about how student-to-teacher ratios are determined and feel strongly that when those ratios are determined an allowance must be made for multi-grade classrooms; it does not appear that that is being taken into consideration. The additional work it takes to prepare for and teach multi-grade classrooms should be factored in to the calculation

We believe that that every school needs to be taken on a case-by-case basis and consideration should be given to our small size and geographic isolation. We receive a Small Schools Grant, which is an adjustment that is greatly appreciated and appropriate. We are also aware that adjustments for English as a second language and poverty are made for other much larger schools that have a greater economy of scale. While we have worked hard to cut costs without cutting educational opportunities, there is a minimum need for staffing that can’t be avoided, short of closing our school, which is not an acceptable alternative given our geographic isolation and the dangerous nature of Windham Hill.

**Enrollment projection** - We have conducted a census of 0-5 year olds and determined that in the next five years we will have an additional 18-20 children attending WES. Our population seemed to bottom out a couple of years ago and, contrary to State trends, has been slowly, but steadily growing. We expect that it will continue on that same trend line given the census of young children in town. In FY2019, we anticipate that we will have five additional students actually at the school, which will bring the enrollment up to 20 students plus at least six Pre-K children, for a total of 26 students. In FY 2020, we expect to add five Pre-K children but lose four students due to graduation for a total of 27 students.

The following graph indicates total student enrollment from 2010 with projections through 2020.



**Financial Analysis** – The Windham School Board has always done its very best to bring budgets in at the least possible amount while providing excellent educational opportunities for our students.

Our Education Spending per Equalized Pupil has been well-aligned with the State Average Education Spending per Equalized Pupil despite our small size. In FY2017, it was actually below the state average; in FY 2018, it was just slightly above. Our per pupil cost for FY2016 school year was \$15,098, which resulted in a District Equalized Homestead rate of \$1.58. For FY2017, the cost per student was \$14,523 and the tax rate was \$1.50. For FY2018, the cost per student increased to \$15,760, which was just over the State average of \$15,368, for a tax rate of \$1.55. Our budget numbers for FY2019 have not been finalized at the time of this writing, but we anticipate an increase due to increased special education costs. Please see Appendix C – Section 1 for documentation from Brad James, Agency of Education.

Part of the reason for our increase in FY2018 was due to our investment in a more energy-efficient, cost-saving lighting system at the school, which, hopefully, will pay for itself over the next several years. We also invested in a new school bus because the old one (which was not that old) was, in our estimation, a lemon with a braking system, in the words of the dealer, more suitable for New Mexico weather conditions. We have two more years to pay for the bus, at which point, our debt will be paid and the budget reduced by \$4,996.

We do have a concern that our capital debt level of approximately \$22,000 is significantly less than that of the NewBrook School (\$352,166) and Leland and Gray Union High School (\$1,580,000).

**Conclusion** – The Windham School District, while small, provides excellent educational opportunities at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value. Merger with another, larger district is not practicable and would run contrary to the goals of Act 46. Educational opportunities, provided by the School Board’s connection to the community, would be lost; budgetary transparency and accountability would be seriously diminished, if not, eliminated due to combination with much larger budgets; perceived benefits would, in most cases, not be possible due to geographic isolation; parental and community involvement at School Board meetings would decrease due to geographic isolation; and costs, quite simply, most likely would rise.

The Windham School Board requests that the State Board of Education approve our request to form an Alternative Governance Structure. We will continue to collaborate with other districts in the WCSU to seek streamlining, cost-saving strategies in order to make us all more cost-effective. We will continue to share staff including music, physical education, nurse, guidance counselor, and special education personnel, with other school districts within the WCSU. This arrangement has allowed schools to be flexible with staffing placements from year to year, while providing full-time, more stable, sustainable employment for our employees, all managed by the WCSU.

We appreciate and value our membership in the WCSU but want to maintain, for all the reasons cited above, our own School Board and budget. This is strongly supported by the townspeople who took the time to respond to the Survey as indicated by the Survey results. We ask that the State Board of Education grant our request to establish an Alternative Governance Structure and appreciate your consideration.