

**Public Comment to the Arlington Select Board
Submitted by Elizabeth Rossi, Arlington Resident
August 3, 2026**

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Act 170 Merger and Consolidation Discussion Groups

First, I want to thank the Select Board for taking this issue up. I think it shows important recognition that the decisions now facing the Arlington School District go well beyond the schools themselves. They affect town planning, housing, economic vitality, our ability to attract and keep families here, and ultimately the long-term future of Arlington.

In February, the Arlington School District Board was asked to create a task force of board and community members so Arlington could begin gathering public input and assessing its position before the merger and consolidation process began. The Board Chair acknowledged that request at the Annual Meeting in March and indicated it would be taken up. That work has not happened.

The School Board has also been asked by me and other community members to take additional steps that would support a more meaningful approach to this process, including publicly presenting a detailed analysis of school performance and conducting a targeted survey of parents of elementary and middle school students—the families most likely to be directly affected by structural changes in the near term. That has not happened either.

Now Act 170 has passed and the process is moving forward. Facilitators are to begin working with school boards as these merger discussion groups take shape.

In June, I told the ASD Board that Arlington's position in that consultation should come through public discussion and a Board vote.

That has not yet happened.

This is why I believe the Select Board's involvement is important now.

I am asking the Select Board to make a strong public statement supporting the Arlington School District being in Group 3, the Manchester-oriented group, rather than Group 4, the Bennington-centered group where Act 170 currently places Arlington.[1][2]

I want to be clear about what I am asking.

I am not asking the Select Board to decide today whether Arlington should merge, close a school, change supervisory unions, or adopt a particular final structure.

I am asking the Select Board to take a position on where Arlington should begin this process.

I believe Arlington should begin it in Group 3, and I continue to believe there are at least five strong reasons for that.

1. Group 3 better reflects Arlington's actual community and geographic relationships.

Appoint rep by 9/15
24th meeting
have letter
Katie Hodo

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Manchester and the surrounding area are already an important part of daily life for many Arlington families—for work, services, recreation, child care, and educational opportunities.

The merger process should reflect how families and students actually move through the region, rather than simply defaulting to existing administrative relationships.

For the Select Board, this matters because school structure and town planning cannot realistically be separated. Where families work, live, shop, seek services, and educate their children all affect Arlington's future as a community.

2. Group 3 gives Arlington a more meaningful starting point for this process.

Arlington has already spent years within a Bennington-centered regional structure.

Starting in Group 3 gives Arlington the opportunity to begin this work in a different regional context and to do so with districts that may offer different educational, operational, financial, and governance possibilities.

That does not mean Arlington is committing to a merger with any particular district.

It means Arlington is choosing the discussion group that I believe gives us the best opportunity to meaningfully consider the range of options in front of us.

If a Manchester-oriented configuration ultimately does not work, the process will show that.

But Arlington should not start in a group that already points us back toward the same regional structure we have been part of for years.

3. Educational opportunity should be at the center of this process, along with what Arlington brings to it.

We should be asking what arrangement gives Arlington students the strongest educational opportunities and what Arlington itself brings to a regional discussion.

That means looking honestly at our schools, programs, facilities, enrollment, transportation, infrastructure, and the role those assets could play in a different structure.

This also matters economically.

The quality and range of educational opportunities available here affects whether families choose to move to Arlington and whether they stay. It affects housing demand and, over time, the strength of the local tax base.

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For many Arlington residents, their home is their largest financial asset. The Town has a real interest in making sure changes to the school system strengthen rather than weaken Arlington's ability to attract families and remain a viable community.

4. Arlington should not simply default back into a Bennington-centered structure.

Act 170 creates a process for examining educational opportunity, efficiency, costs, transportation, governance, community fit, and other factors.

That process should actually matter.

If Arlington starts in Group 4, there is a real risk that the existing Bennington-centered structure becomes the default simply because it already exists.

There is also history here that should not be ignored.

Arlington residents expressed substantial resistance during Act 46 to deeper consolidation into a Bennington-centered structure. Unless there has been a significant change in community sentiment, that history should matter when deciding where Arlington begins this process.

There are also real questions about enrollment, facilities, and educational outcomes within the Bennington-centered system that need to be considered.

Bennington has excess elementary capacity and declining enrollment, while also having newer middle and high school facilities that need students. Those realities create their own pressures and priorities.

I do not think Arlington should begin this process in a structure where those existing needs may shape the discussion before Arlington has had the opportunity to consider a different regional direction.

That is especially important if we want to make sure Fisher receives the attention it needs and that the full range of options for our future middle and high school students remains open.

5. Arlington needs to act now, while it still has the ability to influence where this process starts.

These discussion groups will soon begin organizing, identifying issues, requesting data, and determining what configurations deserve serious study.

Arlington is better positioned if it enters that process with a clear position about where it belongs rather than waiting until those conversations are already underway.

Being in Group 3 does not guarantee a merger outcome. It does not determine what happens to Arlington Memorial High School, Fisher, or any particular grade level.

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But the group Arlington starts in matters.

It determines who is initially sitting around the table, what regional relationships are being discussed first, and which options receive attention at the beginning of this process.

That is why I do not think Arlington should treat the group assignment as a minor procedural issue.

We cannot put the cart before the horse.

Conversations about closing Arlington Memorial High School are premature. So is deciding that Arlington must merge, or that Arlington must never merge.

Those are later questions.

The decision in front of us now is where Arlington should begin this process, and I believe the answer should be Group 3.

The Select Board has an important role here because this is not only an education question. It is a question about Arlington's housing market, economic vitality, public infrastructure, ability to attract families, and long-term planning.

I respectfully ask the Select Board to make a public statement supporting the Arlington School District being placed in and participating in Group 3, the Manchester-oriented merger discussion group, rather than Group 4.

That statement would not dictate the final outcome.

It would make clear where the Town believes Arlington should begin this process and which regional relationship should be the starting point for the serious work ahead.

Footnotes

[1] Group 3: Mettawee School District, Stratton School District, Taconic & Green Regional School District, Wells Spring Unified Union School District, and Winhall School District.

[2] Group 4: Arlington School District, Mount Anthony Union High School District #14, North Bennington Graded School District, Sandgate School District, and Southwest Vermont Union Elementary School District.

TOP STORY

Merger studies, CESA's ready for launch

By Andrew McKeever, Vermont News & Media correspondent

Aug 3, 2026

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State Senator Seth Bongartz discusses Act 170 and the conversations about CESA's and merger study groups that will be forming before an audience at the Arlington Memorial High School. Both of the Bennington County Supervisory unions will be taking part in these statewide conversations.

ANDREW MCKEEVER -- VERMONT NEWS & MEDIA
CORRESPONDENT

BENNINGTON — With the start of a new school year suddenly less than a month away following the summer break, another education calendar is nearing a roll-out.

Under Act 170, the education transformation measure which passed the state legislature and was signed into law by Gov. Phil Scott on June 18, two processes intended to find solutions for both improving educational outcomes and stabilizing their costs were set up and are moving forward.

One is about the Cooperative Educational Service Areas, or CESAs, which are intended to regionalize and share administrative services across school districts. They will not change school district boundaries or governance.

The state has been divided into seven regional CESA's, which will start meeting in early August. The Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU), and the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union (BRSU), the two supervisory districts/unions which oversee most of the school districts across Bennington County, are part of the Southwest CESA, which stretches north to include the supervisory unions around Rutland. It covers 45 towns all together and will hold its opening meeting at 10 a.m. on Aug. 6 at the Mill River Union High School in North Clarendon. The meeting is open to the public.

The purpose of that group is to see if there's a way that existing school districts can share resources and save money in the process, said SVSU school superintendent Tim Payne. There are several categories to be looked at, such as transportation, food services, finance and special education, he said.

"It's an ambitious list," he said. "I do see a couple of paths forward where we would collaborate, especially in the area of student services or special education, where it might not be viable for all of us to offer up a program specifically."

Then there is the second and parallel track, a separate one which sets up merger study committees, and which may have the most visible impact on the state's education system. These committees will explore whether school districts would be better off merging, and which schools might close or remain open, often a flashpoint in local politics over recent years.

According to a statement recently released by the BRSU, the stated goals of the merger study groups are to create districts with at least 2,000 students which include towns that are geographically contiguous, and to perform a financial analysis of how those districts can ensure equal access to high quality educational opportunities for students.

The merger committee will then determine whether those districts will be able to operate under the parameters of the Foundation Formula in fiscal year 2030. Additionally the merger groups are intended to prevent any stand-alone districts of 750 students or fewer from being blocked out of larger unified union districts, the statement adds.

The Foundation Formula is a new system of financing education in the state where each school obtains a fixed dollar amount for each student it enrolls, with “weights” or allowances for additional money for students with special needs, and which could also be adjusted for secondary schools, where education costs per student are typically more expensive than in elementary schools.

“Merger committees are going to need to determine if it reasonable to merge,” said BRSU Superintendent Randi Lowe in a recent interview. “In order to merge into a unified union school district, you need to have the same operating structure. For our merger committee, that is going to be the biggest topic of conversation because we will be bringing districts with three different operating structures together to discuss how do we move forward.”

Those three districts include the Taconic & Green School District, the Mettawee School District, which includes the towns of Rupert and Pawlet, and the Winhall School District, which does not operate any school but pays tuition for its students to attend schools located out of the town. The supervisory union does not operate its own high school.

Ultimately, supervisory unions will no longer exist if this all moves forward, she said, and will be replaced by unified union districts, where education in the school district from kindergarten - 12th grade is under the same district’s control.

“There needs to be intentional, thoughtful approach to trying to merge,” she said. “The legislation is written so that people are putting a good faith effort into the process and keeping an open mind.”

A few unknowns remain around how proportional the membership and representation of the school districts within the merger study committee should be, she added.

“We’re looking for some additional guidance on how districts should be considering the membership of the merger committee. What should that look like? What are considerations?” she said. “By Sept. 15, each board needs to have appointed their representative, and then by Oct. 15, the merger committee needs to have held its first meeting.”

Individuals who will act as facilitators for the merger study groups, plus a lead facilitator to oversee their work will also need to be hired by Sept. 1. Interviews for those positions are being handled by the Vermont Learning Collaborative, an educational services organization that currently serves schools in southeastern Vermont.

School districts in Bennington County will be divided into two merger study groups, each largely mirroring their current supervisory union boundaries. The merger study group that includes the BRSU districts will also have the Stratton, Wells and Middletown Springs school districts included. Each school district will have at least one representative in the merger study group.

The merger study committee reports will be due by Sept. 1, 2027. They will be making recommendations, but not final decisions.

Reconciling the different operating structures of the existing school districts into one larger unified union district will also be an issue facing the SVSU, School Superintendent Tim Payne said. The six school boards which make up the supervisory union have a variety of structures and are very distinct, he said.

“They serve constituents who have very distinct needs and wishes for the future,” he said. “People have very strong feelings about these on both sides. So I would very much anticipate that as we get into the conversation, that folks will have very strong opinions in both.”

Under the legislation as it was developed and enacted in Montpelier earlier this year, the tough conversations will be held on the local levels, he said.

The easy consolidations of districts have already been achieved under Act 46, previous education reform legislation passed in 2015 which sought to encourage and incentivize compatible school districts to merge. Now will come conversations about more challenging consolidations, Payne said.

"I don't mean challenging for the personalities, I want to be really clear about that," Payne said. "The challenge for the SVSU is we have a variety of structures. It is not six similar school boards coming together, which people would be, oh, 'that'd be easy, just squish them together.' They are very distinct."

Having the merger study committee conversations is mandatory under the Act 170 statute, but the eventual decision to merge is a voluntary one, up to the school districts themselves, said State Senator Seth Bongartz, one of Bennington County's two state senators. As the Chair of the Senate Education Committee, he played a significant role in the development of the eventual legislation that was signed by the Governor.

No school or school district will be automatically consolidated or closed under this law, he and his counterpart, State Senator Rob Plunkett, stated in a commentary they released earlier in July. Nothing will be final until the voters of the districts have a chance to weigh in at the ballot box, and that opportunity will come during March Town Meeting in 2028, after both the CESA and merger study groups will have finished their work and released their reports and findings.

"What's really happening here is simply getting districts to the table with a facilitator to have the discussion," Bongartz said in a separate interview. "Each district is going to have to make up its own mind and they'll weigh all of those factors."

Those factors will include possible cost savings which could eventually contribute to lower pressure on property tax rates, alongside the roles schools have historically played in communities, he said, such as creating identity and common bonds, and ways for families to meet and form friendships.

“So I think the question will be within the merger group — ‘are there possible other mergers possible that will make sense,’” Bongartz said. “I think what we’ll see is some mergers across Vermont. It depends on what people want to do.”

Senator Bongartz led a discussion on Act 170 and how it will roll out at Arlington Memorial High School on July 16. Arlington and the neighboring, and non-operating, Sandgate school district wound up merging several years ago, somewhat reluctantly, into the SVSU out of the Act 46 process. Bongartz emphasized that any merger discussion would come with local input through a voluntary merger process. He also urged local residents to engage with and take part in the merger study committee meetings that will be coming up.

“These meetings are public,” he said. “And I think it’s very important for members of the public who have an interest to be in the room because you’ll then really understand what’s going on and you will have the ability to influence what happens if you are able to be in the room at least some of the time.”

Asked afterwards for his reactions to the merger study process about to unfold, Todd Wilkins, the chair of the Arlington School District’s board of directors, said it was too early to tell how it was going to impact Arlington. They would be taking part in the discussions and will present information to the community at the appropriate times, he said.

“Obviously, it has always been the goal of our school board to have Arlington maintain its schools the way they currently exist,” he said. “And I think that that will be something that leads us through these discussions and any decisions that are eventually made by the townspeople.”

Another more overarching factor is the statewide decline in the number of students enrolled in Vermont's elementary, middle and high schools. Over the past 25 years that number has declined from about 120,000 to a little more than 80,000 currently. Buildings designed for larger school populations are more expensive to maintain, and less efficient.

In June, the BRSU closed two of its elementary schools, one in Danby and one in Sunderland, where enrollment had fallen to the point where it became too expensive to offer a full range of educational opportunities to the students. BRSU Superintendent Randi Lowe said that while these moves were difficult, the changing realities of providing education across the state made these discussions necessary.

"I think we need to own the fact that the only way we're going to get operational efficiency is to be operating fewer schools," Dr. Lowe said. "That also supports educational efficiency, because as we've seen here with the work Taconic and Green did, we will now be having elementary schools with 200 students, two classes per grade, full-time nurse, school counselors, special ed, academic interventionists. All of the services that all of those kids could potentially need at any one time are full-time in a school, right? Kids get to mix up and have different teachers and be grouped in a way that's really best for each learner."