
School Consolidation Voluntary Merger Groups & The Future of our Schools

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Date Wed 7/29/2026 12:18 PM

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Over the course of 2026, the Planning Commission has been following two pieces of legislation that seem/seemed to have significant consequences for the town of Arlington. One of these issues, stemming from Vermont Act 181, looks to have gone away with the passage of S325 which revoked the Road Rule as well as Tiers 2 & 3 established in Act 181 and which had significant effects on potential development in the rural districts of Arlington. However, the ramifications of Act 73 on school consolidation continue to be a concern of the Planning Commission, especially as we begin to revise the Town Plan.

As you undoubtedly know, the senate and legislature have, at least in the short term, stepped back from the forced school consolidations envisioned by Act 73 to recommend voluntary school consolidation and have recommended that school districts form groups to study voluntary consolidation. While the Planning Commission understands that the town has no formal role in the choice of which group the School Board ultimately chooses to join, we do believe that this choice has very serious ramifications for the future of Arlington. While **we all agree that the ideal scenario is that all Arlington schools continue to stay open**, we do worry about what happens if that scenario does not play out and that we as a town are forced to bus our children to another school in Bennington County. We are particularly concerned about the long-term viability of our high school and what would be the best option for the town in the event that the high school was to be required to close. There is no doubt that the high school does not currently meet the attendance requirements that would assure that the high school remains open, and although Senator Bongartz believes he inserted language into the final legislation that protects our high school from closure, we remain hesitant to fully trust that all of our schools are safe from closure. Behind the specter of voluntary school consolidation, the possibility of forced closures in the future still remains. As long as that remains, we do not consider our schools to be safe.

The Arlington School Board is now engaged in the process of deciding which discussion group they should join. To the South is Group 4, which comprises the SVSU and includes the schools in Bennington; to the North is Group 3, which includes the schools in Manchester. While the Arlington School Board has been able to gain significant influence in the SVSU, we believe that it is imperative for the School Board to consider joining Group 3. The reasons for this

viewpoint are chiefly, but not exclusively, economic. We believe that a closure that requires our students to be bused to Bennington - and particularly to Mount Anthony Union High School - would have negative implications for our town's property values and tax base. It is also equally judged by our committee to not be in the best interests of our students. In our opinion, participation in Group 3 leaves open the possibility that our students can be enrolled at BBA or Long Trail School in the event of a high school closure, which is both property value and student positive. Again, our chief hope is that all of our schools stay open, but the possibility of school closure remains real, and we believe that as a town we must remain clear-minded as to what our best choices are for our students and for our town in the event that what we wish for does not come to fruition.

During this year's town meeting, the chair of the Arlington School Board, Todd Wilkins, talked about the formation of a task force to include members of the Select Board, the School Board and others important stakeholders to the school issue. In the months since this idea was floated, no significant movement has been noted towards the establishment of a such a task force. However, we believe that there is a vital need for the establishment of such a committee and that the time for such a committee to be established is now. In our view, the Select Board should move to establish this committee, and the APC, as a town body, hopes to join you in providing members to this committee.

Again, the ultimate decision as to which merger group study the School Board is to join is to be made by the Arlington School Board; however, it is of utmost importance that the Select Board and the Planning Commission weigh in on this decision. It would be a considerable mistake not to provide our opinions and concerns to the Arlington School Board.

We thank you for your consideration and hope to further discuss this issue.

Sincerely,
Garret Siegel
Chair, Arlington Planning Commission
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