

## To Peacham School Board

### From the Peacham Act 46 Study Committee

#### Final Report February 7th 2017

#### Background Information

The Peacham Act 46 Study Committee was formed by the Peacham School Board in March 2016 and for the past year has considered the options available to the Town of Peacham, as related to potential school configurations that meet the goals of Act 46, Vermont's school governance law.

The committee developed a website with two purposes: -

- To be an information hub for documents related to the work taking place
- To be an access point for community members interested in staying current with the process.

The website is [www.peachamact46.org](http://www.peachamact46.org) and a visit to the site will give you the back ground information you need to support the findings in this report.

The study committee has made the goals of Act 46 the focus of the work and the findings and recommendations contained in this report can be directly linked back to the goals of the law.

The goals are: -

- Provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide;
- Lead 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;
- Maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, with a goal of increasing the district-level ratio of students to full-time equivalent staff;
- Promote transparency and accountability;
- Are delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.

Historically the Town of Peacham is a PK-12 system that has operated a school for PK-6 and provided Tuition for students in Grades 7-12. Act 46 requires the Town of Peacham to consider 3 essential questions. **"What is the best operating structure to meet the goals of Act 46?" "Would a change in operating structure better enable the town of Peacham to better meet the goals of Act 46?"** and **"Who can we work with and in what capacity to better meet the goals of the law?"** For this purpose the School Board outlined 4 options for Peacham to consider.

#### **Option #1: PK-6 District**

Form a PK-6 district with like communities that operate PK-6 schools. Tuition students for grades 7-12.

#### **Option #2: PK-8 Merger**

Join a PK-8 district with Barnet, Waterford and Walden. Give up middle school choice for grades 7 and 8. Keep high school choice for grades 9-12.

#### **Option #3: Independent PK-12 district within an SU**

Remain an independent PK-12 district in a new supervisory union operating a school for PK-6 and paying tuition for students in grades 7-12.

#### **Option #4: Tuition All Students**

Close Peacham Elementary School and tuition all students PK-12.

The committee and the school board divided the workload related to the 4 options. The School board focused on attending meetings related to Options 1 and 2 and the committee focused on the goals of the law and how it related to all 4 options. An organizational chart is available on the website which illustrates this.

## **Committee Findings.**

### **1. Learning Opportunities PK-6**

The document **Peacham Elementary School Values 2015**, available on the website, is a fundamental guiding document for Peacham School. This document has historical roots and the values outlined in it are consistent with values expressed by prior guiding documents adopted by the school board. If Thelma White, the principal of the school in the 1960's read this document she would recognize the school, the values represented in it are consistent with the history of schooling in Peacham.

The document provides information related to the goals of the law concerning equity, quality and State articulated Education Quality Standards. Significant statements in the document include the following: -

**“The Peacham Elementary School will continue to fulfill and exceed institutional criteria outlined in the Vermont State Board of Education Quality Standards, adopted April 5, 2014.”**

**“Historically, the Peacham Elementary School has offered expanded learning opportunities that include subjects and themes beyond what is covered in some neighboring schools, specifically:**

- Second language programs have been a regular part of the curriculum since the 1980s. Both French and Spanish have been offered over the years.
- A nationally recognized Place-based Learning program, Vermont Rural Partnerships, was developed in the 1990s. Strong community connections exist to this day, providing opportunities for student leadership and voice while enriching the school.
- Expanded Art and Music offerings effectively support the core curriculum and offer learning opportunities for a variety of learners. This program goes beyond music practice to offer introductory music composition and theory.
- A certified Tech Integrationist mentors students and staff and connects the Peacham Elementary School with a wider learning community. PES students in grades K-6 have either an individual laptop or access to our common lab.
- PES Music, Art, Tech/Library, and classroom staff, are members of the Vermont Creative Schools Initiative: A Collaborative Project of Catamount Arts and Community Engagement Lab.
- Students have the option to learn orchestral wind and brass instruments as of grade 3. All students have the opportunity to learn percussion instruments, the traditional recorder and with the donation of ukuleles from the PTF Group, all students and some as young as 2nd grade have the opportunity to begin learning to use string instruments as well.
- The school has a long history of bringing Artists in Residence annually to the school.
- PES integrates computer coding and robotics into its instructional program. A partnership with the Peacham Library leverages kits and expertise beyond the school walls for a variety of learners.
- PES is a VT Agency of Agriculture Farm-to-School grantee. Our Science and Social Studies instruction includes embedded components of plant science, the economics of food

production and marketing, and an understanding of nutritional choices. Our partnership with a local organic farmer supplies us with material and instructional support managing our school gardens and supplying our in-house food service.

- At least two health/physical education classes are scheduled for all students each week. These classes address all Health Core Concept Areas of the 2008 Health Education GLEs and are delivered by a certified Health Educator and a Physical Education teacher.
- The outdoor environment is used regularly for learning with a Nature Trail for natural science education, an ice rink for P.E., hills and trails for sledding, snowshoeing and cross country skiing.
- A wide variety of after school sports activities are offered in cooperation with other schools in the area to enable students to access a variety of sports and teams regionally.
- The Peacham PTF raises funds to support a robust and long-standing partnership established in the 1980's, with the Burke Mountain Ski School and St. Johnsbury Academy field house to support school-wide ski and swim lessons that enable every PES student to learn the fundamentals of these sports.
- The Peacham School's Extended Learning Opportunity program regularly features community members who share their skills and wisdom with students, teaching lessons on a variety of topics — such as coding, programming, art, yoga, dance, and robotics — during and after the school day.
- Strong collaborations exist for science enrichment with the Fairbanks Museum of Science, the Peacham Observatory and the Montshire Museum.

**Via a review of this document and conversation with parents the committee concluded that the Town of Peacham historically and currently provides enhanced opportunities for students, beyond the requirements of the Education Quality Standards outlined by the state of Vermont for grades PK-6. Concerning student learning opportunities Peacham School district currently exceeds the requirements of Act 46 for grades PK-6.**

## **2. Learning Opportunities Grades 7-12**

For grades 7-12 the town of Peacham offers an expansive array of opportunities by paying tuition to a school of choice for all students in these grades. A chart of choices for education available on the website lists schools of choice over a 14 year period. This illustrates that Peacham families historically take advantage of choice to access the wide variety of public and private schools available regionally. The community wide survey completed by the committee gathered additional data related to school choice and found that the ability to choose a school for students in the upper grades was valued. Approx. 72% of respondents felt that retaining school choice at grades 7 and 8 was “extremely important” or “important”. The survey noted that parents appreciated being able to choose a school that offered opportunities specific to their child's individual needs. For example a small public school like Danville [grades 7-12] where their children could be a part of a close knit community, participate in a wide variety of activities from sports to theatre and not be required to transition again at grade 9. An analysis of the comments in the survey supported the fact that school choice at this level offers an expansive array of opportunities to students. Additionally, the Peacham school supports parents during transition, by facilitating visits to schools for 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, via Parent Conferences helping families make the best choice for their child's learning needs and through communications with the receiving schools. The committee also considered equity of access and noted that several schools provide buses for Peacham students and that as a small community car-pooling is arranged. We did not find examples of a lack of busing limiting equity of choice for some students; rather we found that the community works together to enable students to get to their

school of choice.

**The committee concluded that choice for schooling has historically served Peacham Students well by providing the ability to match a student to the school best able to meet their learning needs. Additionally the survey showed that the community values the ability to offer school choice beyond the elementary school years. The committee did not discover any negative equity implications for school choice at this time.**

### **3. Student Enrollment**

The committee gathered census data for 0 – 12 year olds and reviewed the last several years of data. This information is available on the website. The current preschool is well subscribed. An enhanced period of stability for the school will, we feel, maintain this trend if not lead to increased enrollment in the future. The committee also noted the increasing number of families with Peacham preschoolers who have Peacham roots, whose parents attended the Peacham School and chose to return to Peacham to raise families. Anecdotally many of them voiced a desire for their children to have the same small school experience they themselves had benefitted from followed by the ability to choose schooling for the older grades. **The census data indicated that Peacham School is maintaining enrollment and is not currently in a position of declining enrollment for the foreseeable future.**

### **4. Student Performance**

The committee reviewed historical and current student performance data PK-6. While annual cohort numbers are small and may present a variable picture that is hard to draw conclusions from, it is possible to look at long-range trends of data over time. It is also a goal to continuously monitor and work to enhance student academic performance. While we reviewed a number of data sources we have included the long-range data on the website. Currently we have no ability to review student performance data beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade, as this data is included in school scores, which are not differentiated by town of residence. **The data we reviewed indicates that Peacham students perform well in relation to their peers locally and throughout Vermont. Peacham students regularly score above state and district averages.**

### **5. Voice in decision making**

The survey of Peacham residents showed overwhelmingly strong data related to the desire of Peacham citizens to retain a substantive voice in school decision-making. Historically Peacham has valued a voice in decision making in the education of youth, it is significant to note that in 1795 the Peacham community chose to be the site of Caledonia counties first grammar school rather than the site of the county court house. This interest and involvement in education continues to this day. Over ninety percent (90%) of survey respondents felt it was either “extremely important” or “important” to have a level of equity of voice in education decision-making. Peacham residents take seriously their annual participation in the school portion of town meeting. In 2015 the town voted to enlarge the school board to 5 members from 3 and volunteers were found for this task. Additionally the school board requested at town meeting the formation of the local Act 46 committee and 9

volunteers stepped up to take on this task. Democracy is alive and well in Peacham and community members have expressed their wish to retain the ability to actively participate in decision-making concerning education for the future. This level of concern and involvement in education has historically served Peacham students well, has added value to their ability to access opportunities and develop as future citizens and has provided oversight of responsible school budgets annually for many years. **Based on this strong local value, the committee recommends that the Peacham School board works to retain an independent school district or enters a merger with some level of equity related to voice in decision-making. The committee does not feel it is in the best interests of Peacham students to abdicate control over educational decision-making by entering into a situation with a marginalized rather than equitable voice.**

## 6. Options available

The committee reviewed the options outlined by the school board and simultaneously considered them against the goals of the law. The comprehensive information related to the study of these options is currently in the following locations.

The committee website <http://peachamact46.org>

The CCSU district website which houses the minutes of the PK-8 merger conversations.

<https://sites.google.com/a/ccsuvt.net/act46/k-8-information>

The Peacham School website which has the minutes of the PK-6 merger conversations.

<http://peachamelementaryschool.com/peacham-school-board/school-board-meeting-minutes/>

### **Option #1: PK-6 District**

Form a PK-6 district with like communities that operate PK-6 schools. Provide tuition for all students for grades 7-12.

The school board made every effort to explore this option for consideration for the future. The Board reached out to the Greensboro and Stannard communities, our nearest partners with similar operating configurations and held joint meetings. The board formed an exploratory committee and with the help of the superintendent secured a \$5,000 exploratory grant to consider this option. This group is unable to move forward at this time due to the difference in operating structure of the Greensboro community. While Stannard operates as Peacham does with a PK-6 school and choice for grades 7-12, Greensboro does not. Greensboro operates PK-6 but is part of a Union School District for grades 7-12. This difference in operating structure limits Greensboro's ability to form an Act 46 merger with Peacham and Stannard. Both the Greensboro and Stannard districts are now pursuing remaining independent school districts and not merging due to this complication. **Unless this situation changes a PK-6 merger with these partners is not possible for the town of Peacham at this time.**

### **Option #2: PK-8 Merger**

Join a PK-8 district with Barnet, Waterford and Walden. Give up middle school choice for grades 7

and 8. Keep high school choice for grades 9-12.

The school board has actively pursued this option by becoming members in the exploratory committee formed in March 2016. In fall 2016 the towns of Barnet, Waterford and Walden voted to form a 706B committee to bring this merger option to a vote. Peacham chose not to join this committee at this time and instead sent a community representative to monitor the development of the work of the committee. The committee found the following information significant when considering this option.

- **Scale School Size**– Peacham School is of a different scale to the other schools involved in this merger. Peacham operates a significantly smaller school of approx 56 students while the other schools involved are double or triple in size. The scale of our school offers opportunities large schools cannot implement due to their size. Our scale allows for personalized learning opportunities, flexibility such as flexible student groupings across age bands in multiage learning environments and creativity such as our extensive community involvement. These opportunities are not as easily facilitated in larger schools. A merged district would likely standardize opportunities across the district and this could diminish the opportunities currently offered to Peacham students and our ability to maximize the advantages of size.
- **Scale Town Size** – The town of Peacham is of a different scale to the other towns involved in this merger. Peacham has a smaller population than these towns. This would marginalize Peacham’s voice in future decision-making due to the requirement for proportional representation. On major decisions should Peacham, looking from a smaller school perspective, see the decision differently, they would likely be outvoted.
- **Committee Comment** - The committee is not suggesting smaller schools are better than larger schools or vice versa but we do wish to emphasize that smaller schools and communities face different challenges and opportunities than larger schools and towns and given a decision to merge a merger with like sized partners would be optimal for Peacham. The PK-8 merger is not a merger of like size partners.
- **Voice in decision-making** - A review of the PK-8 draft merger report indicates Peacham would have *16% representation* in district decision-making. The other towns would have the following: *Barnet 37%, Walden 20% Waterford 27%*.
- **Opportunities for grades 7-8 grade students** - This merger would require Peacham to relinquish school choice for grades 7 and 8. Data shows Peacham students take wide advantage of school choice.

A review of the draft report of the K-8 merger was unable to clarify to the committee the specific learning opportunities that would be afforded Peacham students by the merger beyond what are currently available. The PK-8 706b committee report acknowledges the need to provide improved programming for this age group in the towns of Waterford, Walden and Barnet. The committee also articulated a list of aspirations that could improve programming including the development of a “regional middle school” but the group has agreed to no specific opportunities, and the report acknowledges that enhanced programming would require additional spending. The draft report states “Unlike other mergers, sweeping opportunities for restructuring existing school programs to create more “efficient and effective” school programs, where the savings could be directed towards expanded program offerings, are not easily implemented given the geography of Caledonia County.”

The merger committee has had many meetings and worked hard but there is concern amongst the Peacham committee members that opportunities for Peacham students in grades 7-8 would not be enhanced as a result of this merger and that the restriction in school choice would diminish opportunities Peacham students currently take advantage of, a

primary goal of the law.

- **7/8 District Choice for students in grades 7-8** – There has been some discussion of within district choice between the merged districts by the 706b committee; this has also been discussion only and the draft reports delegates to the merged board the development of policies for offering intra-district choice. It also adds the statement “along with reasonable access to transportation” which is unclear and could raise equity concerns. The cost implications and equity issues surrounding public school choice have not been discussed or considered by the committee in any depth and consequently this remains an unknown outcome from this merger. We are unaware if it would be just Peacham students who would be offered the opportunity for choice in grades 7/8, as Peacham does not operate these grades, or if all district students would be given this opportunity.
- **Busing for students in grades 7/8** - In a merged district, as 7/8 grade students are bussed to the district schools it is assumed bussing would be offered for Peacham grade 7/8 students to their district school of choice - Waterford, Barnet or Walden. Due to the geography of Peacham the length of bus rides could be an issue. Currently the Peacham bus route is approximately 1 hour this would be a factor in offering 7/8-grade bussing and the length of bus rides could be a problem in addition to the costs involved. This issue is unresolved and would need specific attention and agreement by the study committee in this merger scenario.
- **Opportunities for grades PK-6 students** – A merged district could work to standardize opportunities across the district and this could impact the distinct learning opportunities currently afforded Peacham students. Alternatively a merged district could encourage each school to be distinct and unique. A review of the merger committee draft report notes references to Magnet and Laboratory Schools and an interest in making each school unique. At this point in time this is however hypothetical, with the specifics left to the newly merged board. Consequently there is concern amongst our committee that opportunity for Peacham students PK-6, could also be impacted by merger, as key issues related to cost and equity of access have not been resolved. Under our current governance structure we are able to maintain the individuality and uniqueness of programming of our school so merger would only enhance this if choice became available at the PK-6 level. Logistically this is extremely complex if busses are to transport students from their homes in 4 different towns to one of 4 other towns to attend school. Complex bussing like is time consuming and cost prohibitive in rural communities such as ours and ultimately just not practical. Magnet and Laboratory schools can be a great way to enhance learning opportunities but research shows they are primarily successful in urban areas. Moving to Magnet or Laboratory schools would be a move away from community based schooling, something Peacham has historically valued for its younger children. Concerns cited by magnet school research include - longer travel times, narrowing of curriculum and separation of children from community friends.
- **Committee Comment**- Many of the ideas voiced in the PK-8 minutes are at the idea stage, they appear to be fledgling ideas that could be worthy but are not developed sufficiently to support their practicality or cost. They do not contain sufficient burden of proof that a PK-8 merger would be a positive move for Peacham students, they require a leap of faith the committee does not feel is wise at this time. Additionally many of the system improvements mentioned, for example the creation of distinct and unique programming accessible to all, could be realized by our current governance structure with collaborative agreements made between our school boards.
- **Cost implications** – At this time we have tax projections but no concrete data regarding tax implications. Financial projections, which are based on level funding, show temporary decreases in taxes while state tax incentives are in place. It is important to remember that they are projections based on no spending increases. At this time we have not seen any estimations of savings resulting from this merger that would result from economies of scale.

**The future tax impact of merger is essentially a guessing game. The taxes that would result from this merger would be the result of the spending supported by the merged board and voted on by the merged towns via an Australian ballot. Currently they are unknown.**

- **Opportunities and Costs** -The development of opportunities throughout the newly merged district could impact spending in a myriad of ways. A negotiation process will take place when the new district is formed. The district would likely wish to level up opportunities across towns this would involve increased taxes beyond the projections. The outcome could also result in the loss of opportunities in some places to raise opportunities in others. As the smallest school in the newly merged district this would impact Peacham School, particularly as a result of proportional representation. Based on current conversations the outcome of these issues of cost and opportunity are a gamble with potential winners and losers. We would not be joining a clear scenario with a known outcome. It is illustrative to note the recent conversations taking place in a newly merged VT district over their school budget. This article describes this process and it is significant to note how the smaller schools are impacted.

<http://www.timesargus.com/articles/new-school-board-closes-in-on-budget/>

- **School Closure** - The time could come when the merged district would feel it was beneficial financially to the district as a whole to close Peacham School and redistribute the students to the other district schools. In fact to realize many of the aspirations of the PK-8 merger committee it would make sense for the new district to close the smallest school, Peacham, absorb the students into the other district schools and utilize the saved resources to enhance programming district wide.

Without tightly written articles of agreement backed up by a Peacham town, not a merged district vote, this would be a scenario over which the town of Peacham would have limited voice. The current language being considered by the merger committee provides for operation of the all schools for 4 years and *"Thereafter, an affirmative vote of two-thirds of the Board of Directors shall be required to close a school."* This vote would be confirmed by a district wide vote not a specific town vote. It does not provide sufficient protection to the town of Peacham for the continuation of a community school in Peacham. At this time it is insufficient for Peacham to consider this merger option.

- **Articles of Agreement** -A review of the current articles of agreement, developed by the PK-8 merger committee, strongly suggest they do not sufficiently answer issues related to Peacham. To participate in a PK-8 merger Peacham would require the consideration of a minimum of 6 specific articles of agreement by the merger committee.

1. To ensure Peacham maintains an elementary school into the future and not be closed, except by a unanimous vote of the district board and a confirming vote of the residents of the town of Peacham.
2. To ensure Peacham School would remain a PK-6 school and not be altered to offer different grade levels except by a unanimous vote of the district board and a confirming vote of the residents of the town of Peacham. One current article of agreement raises specific concerns as it states *"The new unified board will initiate a district-wide assessment of the effectiveness current educational programs for middle school students (grade 6-8) and recommend specific options for strengthening/enhancing instruction at these grade levels, including potential options for restructuring current elementary school configurations and/or the creating a designated middle school for grades 6-8 in the new unified district."* The outcome of this article raises questions related to increased costs and repurposing of current buildings, which are at this time unknown.
3. To ensure no reduction of opportunities for Peacham students and



require the continued support by the district of specific learning opportunities for Peacham students PK-6 as outlined in the **Peacham Elementary School Values 2015** document, except by a unanimous vote of the board.

4. To maintain staffing at Peacham School, with classroom faculty teaching no more than 2 grade level spans e.g. PK/K, 1/2, 3/4, 5/6 except by a unanimous vote of the district board.
5. To grandfather school choice for Peacham students in grade 7 and 8, whose families request an out of district placement, for a minimum of 12 years except by a unanimous vote of the district board and a confirming vote of the residents of the town of Peacham.
6. An article requiring that the articles of agreement developed by the committee cannot be changed except by a unanimous vote of the board.
7. All articles requiring a vote by the town for their confirmation would additionally need to be set forth as a separate subsection of the warning for the vote on establishment of the New Union School District. **As written the articles of agreement are insufficient to support a decision by the Peacham School Board to join this merger.**

**After considerable consideration the Peacham Act 46 Study committee unanimously recommends that Peacham not pursue a K-8 merger at this time.**

### **Option #3: Independent PK-12 district within an SU**

Remain a standalone PK-12 district in a new supervisory union as an Alternative Structure. Tuition students for grades 7-12.

A review of all the data related to the goals of the law suggests that, at this time, this option comes closest to meeting the goals.

- This option allows Peacham to continue to operate a school in the community, which provides enhanced learning opportunities for students in grades PK-6 that currently go beyond those required by the state of Vermont for as long as the town of Peacham chooses to do so.
- This option allows Peacham to retain our current operating structure and not relinquish school choice for grades 7 or 8, which affords Peacham students a wide range of learning opportunities for these grades and beyond.
- This option allows the Peacham community full voice in decision-making regarding schooling, including the ability to monitor and curb costs.
- This option retains a local school board and the ability of the community to make changes in the future independently of neighboring communities.
- This option allows Peacham to collaborate effectively with our neighbors in a supervisory union alternative structure and to continue to work to meet the goals of the law collaboratively working with our neighbors as equal partners.
- Many of the possibilities for students discussed by the PK-8 706b committee could be realized in an Alternative Structure, this is particularly due to the fact that merger will not as the report states create *"savings that could be directed towards expanded program offerings,"* Rather they could be achieved by collaborative agreements between the boards.

**Remaining an independent district allows Peacham to keep all our options open in the short term. The committee recommends that the Peacham School Board pursue this option at this time.**

#### **Option #4: Tuition All Students**

Close Peacham Elementary School and tuition all students PK-12.

Due to the current size of the Peacham school district, we also studied the implications of closing Peacham School and paying tuition for all students PK-12. As we currently already do this for grades 7-12, it was felt worthy of study by the board and the Peacham Study Committee. A study of this alternative provided information that serves as a useful comparison with the other range of options.

In considering this option we felt that the Peacham School provided the best option for the education of our communities young children locally. We felt that the investment made in the Peacham School by the community has historically been strong and that providing the quality of education Peacham currently provides to its youngest students is a solid educational and community investment and asset.

We feel it was not appropriate to have the community's youngest students on long school bus journeys or car pool rides which would result from the closure of Peacham School. We felt that without close monitoring this could impact equity. While we did not find current equity issues at grades 7-12 that is likely the result of strong ties established in the community and during the PK-6 years at the Peacham School. This enables families to draw on these ties to ensure equity of access beyond grade 6. Beginning choice at preschool would not have this foundation to build on and could raise equity concerns.

A review of the financial implications concluded, that the closure of the school, would be a financial wash and not result in tax savings for community members. Additionally it would allow community members no ability to control costs in the future. **The committee recommends that the school board not pursue this option of school closure at this time.**

#### **Committee Recommendations**

The committee has outlined a list of recommendations for the Peacham School Board's consideration; we feel these steps will enhance Peacham's ability to meet the goals of Act 46.

1. The current faculty and administration are encouraged to actively use the **Peacham Elementary School Values 2015** document. We recommend this document be distributed to parents annually. Additionally we recommend this document be revisited and revised every 5 years by the school board via a community wide strategic planning process.

2. We recommend the Peacham School clarify a supportive **school transition policy**. This could include presentations from receiving schools at a parent evening, annual visits for 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to the schools they are considering for 7<sup>th</sup> grade, parent conferences mid year with a specific transition focus and follow up during the 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, to assess the success of the transition for Peacham students, along with enhanced communications between schools and families for students for whom the transition has been difficult.

3. We recommend the **school board monitor equity of access** to schools 7-12 to ensure the ability of families to access all schools of choice. This could be done via a short survey completed at the town clerks office when families complete tuition documentation.

4. We recommend the administration maintain an **annual listing of student choices for grades 7-12** such as the document available on the website.

4. We recommend that the Peacham School board make every effort to **retain school choice** for grades 7-12 and not consider relinquishing choice unless both opportunities for students can be further enhanced and a clear financial benefit would result.

5. We recommend the administration **maintain a current census of Peacham students** for 0-18 year olds. This will be a helpful documentation for future planning.

6. We recommend the administration develop a **tracking system for Peacham student performance beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade**. This could be as simple as an annual letter to receiving schools requesting student performance data for Peacham students, which could then be compiled and reviewed by the school board.

7. We recommend Peacham consider the proportion of voice in decision making for future schooling options and that Peacham retain a local school board or enter a merger of an appropriate scale. One, which has some level of equity of voice, not a merger that marginalizes the voices of Peacham community members.

8. We recommend Peacham School maximize their ability to **take advantage of our small size**. We do not feel it is productive for Peacham school to try to be a "little big school" rather we feel it should do what ever is possible to capitalize on its small size. This differentiates Peacham from its larger neighbors. Consequently we support flexible multiage learning environments, flexible mixed groupings of students for learning experiences, personalized learning plans, differentiation across age level boundaries, community based learning experiences and making the most of the opportunity our small size affords when it comes to student learning.

9. We recommend the Peacham School board **formally vote not to join the PK-8 merger at this time**.

10. We recommend the school board closely monitor the development of guidelines for the continuation of **Small Schools Grants** into the future. This process, currently based on geographic isolation and student performance, will be going through a rulemaking process and not be finalized until 2018. We recommend the Peacham School Board give information to legislators and testimony to the State Board of Education while these rules are being finalized.

11. We recommend the Peacham School board **pursue an alternative governance structure**, which includes both merged and independent school districts. One that serves a larger number of overall students, while managing a smaller number of school boards. Peacham could act as a full partner in such a district, collaborating to work together effectively with other districts, to fully meet the goals of the law while remaining distinct in how we operate. Additionally the Alternative structure could work with others regionally as a **Rural Education Collaborative** to achieve economies of scale.

12. The committee recommends the Peacham School Board monitors the developments around Act 46 over the next biennium and the results of merger votes statewide. This will allow Peacham to keep all the options and possibilities open. Should circumstances change Peacham would be able to

make decisions accordingly for the future. Currently this means supporting H/S 15 introduced into the Senate by Jane Kitchel and in the house by Janet Ancel and cosponsored by Kitty Toll.

### **Current Status of Act 46 Implementation.**

The following information is relevant to Peacham School's decision-making process at this time.

1. There are **43 districts** that have not chosen to engage at any stage in the formal process of Act 46. These districts are studying the law but not accessing grants to do so, they are for the most part intending to pursue Alternative Structures.
2. There are **8 districts** like Peacham in the exploratory stage that have not formed a 706b committee and are in the process of exploring all their options, including alternative structures.
3. There are **18 districts** in Act 46 study committees currently in 706b form who describe themselves as stalled or making limited progress they will find the ability to fully explore an alternative structure helpful.
4. There are **13 districts** that have rejected merger proposals and disbanded their 706b committees.
5. There are **2 districts** that voted no to merger who will revote this month.

**Statewide there are a total of 82 districts, all outside of Chittenden County and many in the most rural parts of the state who are not moving forward with merger. After scheduled votes in March this number is very likely to rise. This number does not include any districts voting this spring.**

**S15 Introduced by Jane Kitchel in the Senate with many cosponsors and in the house as H15 cosponsored by Kitty Toll proposes to make changes to Act 46 which would allow needed flexibility and the formation of Alternative Structures. This would be helpful legislation. The committee encourages community members to write to both the Senate and House Education Committee members in support of this bill. The committee also hopes all school board members will contact the VSBA and ask for their support in passing H/S15.**

### **Conclusion**

**Our year of meetings and study has brought us to the conclusion that a strong independent school district in Peacham will be an attractive draw for families to move to town and is in the best interests of current students and taxpayers at this time. A strong independent school district will allow Peacham to be responsive and able to make changes in the future should they provide Peacham with clear opportunities to better meet the goals of the law. The committee has appreciated the opportunity to support the school board as they have tackled the issues related to Act 46. We have been able to work together hand in hand and we hope this report and the recommendations included will enhance your ability to make the significant decisions needed for the future of schooling for all Peacham students for the years to come.**

**Sincerely All Peacham Study Committee Members**