

FARMINGTON RIVER REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

OTIS & SANDISFIELD

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TO: The Joint Committee on Education
FROM: Timothy Lee, Superintendent
RE: House Bill 4637, Hancock Exemption (G.L. c. 76 § 12 B)

Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing today to join my colleagues, rural PK-6 or PK-8 school district superintendents, to express concerns regarding the enforcement of Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 76, Section 12B, which mandates that school committees in towns lacking a high school enter into tuition agreements with other districts to allow their students to attend middle or high school. The statute also requires that the district be fiscally responsible for 7-12 students, at the tuition rate, for any non-resident students we receive into our school (via School Choice) during their K-6 years

Our school currently enrolls 128 students in grades PK-6 and we are fiscally responsible for about 110 7-12 students who are residents of the towns of Otis and Sandisfield. Our district has tuition agreements with the Lee Public Schools and the Berkshire Hills Regional School District for grades 7-12. Our district covers a large but sparsely-populated geographic area.

The understanding for out-of-district (Choice) students when they complete grade 6 has always been that they will either return to their district of residence for grades 7-12, or they will attend one of our 7-12 partner schools *as Choice students*. FRRSD has not paid tuition for these non-resident students and, to my knowledge, this has been the case since the regional school district was organized in 1998.

I echo the concerns of my colleagues if new enforcement of the statute will require FRRSD to be financially responsible for the difference between the \$5,000 we receive per school choice student and the cost of tuition at the receiving middle and high schools. While the financial impact we would feel may not be as critical as in smaller rural schools with more choice students, it would represent one more financial challenge during a time of rapidly increasing costs in all areas.

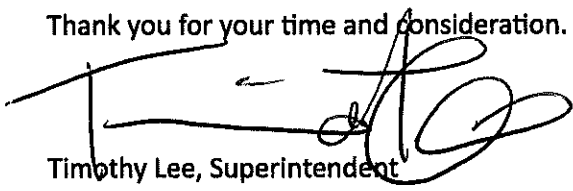
One of our member towns may have already reached a breaking point in their ability to maintain town services while affording participation in a regional school district. This town (Sandisfield) is one of the largest in the state in area with low equalized valuation, a large proportion of untaxed state-owned land, and miles of unpaved roads. The town has petitioned to re-open our regional agreement citing a need to change cost

apportionment. If a compromise cannot be reached, town leaders have suggested it may be necessary to withdraw from the district and reconfigure as a "non-operating" tuition-only town. This action would essentially dissolve our regional PK-6 district and would undoubtedly result in more cost and fewer options for remaining students. I share this story to reinforce the concerns expressed by my colleagues but also to illustrate another impact of this new enforcement: adding more new costs to already struggling rural towns.

There is a long-standing arrangement in our rural PK-6 and PK-8 districts that has served our students well and successfully provided options to students and parents for decades. The arrangement as-is works for all parties so I am a bit baffled as to why we would seek to enforce a mandate that seems to disproportionately impact rural schools and towns in a negative way.

I join my rural superintendent colleagues in urging the committee to reconsider the enforcement of this statute and explore alternative solutions that do not disproportionately impact the financial stability of rural schools. We need policies that support, rather than hinder, our ability to provide a high-quality education to all students, regardless of their geographic location.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Timothy Lee, Superintendent