

The North Bennington Graded School
District
Self Evaluation: Act 46, Sec. 9

North Bennington Graded School
District
9 School Street
North Bennington, VT 05257



The Historic Park McCullough House, North Bennington,

STUDY COMMITTEE**REPORT**

December 2017

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Preface

The North Bennington Graded School District is pleased to submit this Self Evaluation Report as called for in Section 9 of Act 46 to the Vermont Agency of Education. This report is another important milestone for our district. It reflects the efforts of many individuals from community under the leadership of the District's Prudential Committee, who share a deep commitment to the education of the children of our community.

Our community actively engaged in discussions and strategic planning for the future of our school district long before the statewide engagement that resulted in Act 46. Our community's commitment to its children that encouraged and allowed the District's Prudential Committee that produced a governance structure for our district that is both educationally innovative and fiscally responsible. This reports reflects our community's unyielding commitment to preserving this governance structure and where possible expanding its educational benefits to more children in our community.

Community Partners

There are many individuals, community leaders, and parents who have spent countless hours on this process.

Individual

Role

Ray Mullineaux

Chair, North Bennington Prudential Committee
Member, SVSU Board

Matthew Patterson

Vice Chair, North Bennington Prudential Committee
Representative, Act 46 Planning Committee

Maria Scully

Member, North Bennington Prudential Committee

Tim Schroeder

Member, North Bennington Prudential Committee

Kim Krall

Member, North Bennington Prudential Committee
Member, Parent Teacher Organization

Meg Woolmington

Chair, Board of Trustees, The Village School of North Bennington

James Culkeen

Superintendent, Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union

Tom Martin

Head of School, The Village School of North Bennington, Retired
Principal, North Bennington Graded School

We would also like to thank: Bruce Lierman, Glenn Chaney, Eva Sutton, JJ Williams, John Bullock, Tim Newbold and many more.

***PLEASE NOTE:** A full listing of the participants in North Bennington's governance study culminating in this self-study would be impossible. We extend our sincere gratitude to the community as a whole for their active engagement.

Purpose

Our purpose in this self-evaluation is to continue our ongoing work of the past decade evaluating all options for the future governance of North Bennington Graded School District. As has been the case in all our work over these many years, our efforts place a primary focus on serving the educational needs of the children and families of our district. We recognize that school governance must change in order to effectively respond to the constantly evolving needs of children, families, and taxpayers. Moreover, these ever evolving needs are intertwined with the changing dynamics of regional, state, and national events. Effective school governance while grounded in certain principles must also be dynamic and organic.

Principles

The North Bennington Graded School District's work on school governance has been guided by principles that, in the words of the guidance document provided to us for developing this self-evaluation, "*matter most to the community*".

1. Children and the families who nurture them are a community's most valuable asset, and as such are the centerpiece of all decision making for our community.
2. We value inclusion over exclusion. It is vital that all children in our community have complete access to benefits of the educational services we provide.
3. We value equity. It is vital that all children in our community have equal access to our programs and that those programs respond to the individual needs of those learners.
4. We promote diversity of both experience and thought.
5. Families and the community in which they reside are the most effective caretakers of educational programs.
6. An educated citizenry is a public necessity of our democracy. We promote public engagement in our educational governance of our district through transparency and inclusion.
7. Education is a public responsibility that will be delivered in a fiscally responsible manner. When educating children fiscal responsibility and efficiency are not always compatible. In our many conversations with parents, we have yet to have a parent ask us to develop an efficient educational experience for their child.
8. We are committed to ensuring that public education resources are delivered equitably and inclusively.
9. We are committed to a governance structure for our district that ensures public education resources are channeled to direct services to children, classrooms, and teachers.

History

North Bennington has been and continues to be an intensely local community. This strong sense of local community is, in part, due to the economic independence that was fostered by numerous mills and other enterprises that found success on the banks of Paran Creek. At one time, products produced in these Mills could be found throughout the United States. Residents of North Bennington could find most the necessities as well as many of the amenities of life within the confines of their Village. While the



The North Bennington Village Offices

While the Village has always been intensely local, it has also been very comfortable with outsiders. Today, most of our residents work elsewhere but remain very loyal the Village and its way of life. Authors, artists, and poets have called North Bennington home, including Shirley Jackson, Jamaica Kincaid, and Kenneth Noland. The Village of North Bennington has a proud tradition of supporting a thriving artistic community and the proximity of Bennington College has only served to enrich the cultural experience of its residents. The Village prides itself on its local governance and at times finds itself in opposition to the Town of Bennington. Embedded in this culturally rich, diverse and quirky history is an unwavering commitment to the education of the children who reside in the Village.

Village Data

<u>Data Point</u>			<u>Change</u>
Population	1643 (2010)	1795 (2016)	152 +9%
Median Age	24.1		
Age Analysis	28.1% of Population under age 20	29.9% of Population between ages 20-29	
Median Income	\$45,893		
Education Levels	89% HS Diploma	39% Bachelor Degree	

Education in North Bennington Where We Have Been

The Vermont Legislature chartered the North Bennington Graded School District in 1870 with the last amendment to the charter being enacted in 1994. Originally a K-12 district, with the creation of the Mount Anthony Unified District, North Bennington became a K-6 district in 1967.

The district has a unique political configuration as the district borders include both the Village of North Bennington as well as a section of the Town of Shaftsbury commonly referred to as the Shaftsbury ID District. Geographically the district has a small footprint eliminating the need for busing with many children walking to school each day. The district with the support of its community has a long-standing history of outstanding service to children characterized by a nurturing staff that is highly respected by the residents. This record of outstanding educational service has garnered recognition outside the area. *Business Week* has twice named the Village of North Bennington “The Best Place to Raise Children in Vermont” (2010 and 2012).

Beyond this steadfast commitment to educating children of the Village, residents have long understood that the survival of the Village as an independent entity is very much dependent on the continued presence of a school within their village. This understanding has led residents to refer to their Village School as the “Heart of the Community.”

As consolidation emerged as a top policy initiative for the Agency of Education, there was a growing sense of concern about the sustainability of the school among district residents. These concerns were exacerbated by diminishing local control over fiscal and educational issues that the community viewed as paramount to the survival of the school. An ad hoc committee of community leaders, parents, and school staff led the district residents through an exhaustive self-study process looking at every aspect of school governance. With a charge of sustaining the school within the community and establishing a governance system that would ensure the community’s values would be integrated and preserved in the school’s program, The committee conducted a two-year community engagement program with the expressed purpose of gathering information and feedback from district residents regarding their expectations for educational services in North Bennington. This exhaustive process provided the Prudential Committee with valuable insight into the community’s beliefs and expectations, including:

1. The steadfast desire to sustain a school within the Village of North Bennington.
2. Support for a governance structure that ensures the school’s program will reflect the values of the community.
3. Concerns regarding the ongoing loss of local control over the school’s educational and fiscal program.
4. Unyielding support for the school staff and the work they do with children.
5. A strong commitment for sustaining an inclusionary program within the school that welcomes and meets the needs of all children of the district.
6. A governance structure that supports fiscal responsibility and ensures that valuable public tax dollars are dedicated to direct classroom services rather central office staff.

7. A governance structure characterized by transparency, community engagement, and empowering parents to be the primary guardians of their children's educational program.

Following hundreds of hours of dialogue, numerous surveys, and over one hundred presentations, the Prudential Committee of the North Bennington Graded School District conducted a district wide referendum through Australian ballot asking residents to consider transforming the North Bennington Graded School District to non-operating status, thereby closing the public school. This ballot item was put forth on three separate occasions with residents expressing their overwhelming support for transforming the district to non-operating status.

In response to the community's overwhelming support for a school operating within the Village of North Bennington, work began on establishing an independent school in the village. As part of the self-evaluation process the committee that had been examining school governance also began an exhaustive examination of independent schools and their operations. The focus was to be responsive to the beliefs and expectations of the community to ensure that an independent school would be a model of equity, inclusivity, transparency, and excellence. Moreover, the committee was charged to create a school governance structure that ensured fiscal responsibility, transparency in operations, responsiveness to the beliefs and values of the community and its parents, respectful and fair treatment of the school staff, and a program that nurtured and valued each child. The community's research led them to a time honored model of independent school governance found in Vermont and throughout New England called the Town Academy. The Town Academy model provides a creative solution to a challenge that has confronted public school districts in Vermont for well over two hundred years. For years, public school districts that do not operate a school due to circumstances relating to costs, geographic isolation, or low school age population have entered into agreements with independent schools that guarantees resident children access to the independent school program without exception in exchange for an assurance that the public school board would pay the independent school tuition for each resident child in attendance. The committee representing North Bennington found the Town Academy model to be an effective governance system for meeting the expectations and beliefs that the community had set forth in the district self-examination process. Specifically, the Town Academy Model:

1. Provides equity of access to all resident children while ensuring inclusivity. All children residing in the district are assured acceptance to the independent school.
2. Empowers a parent to be the primary guardians of their children's education program through school choice.
3. Engages the community and operates transparently to maintain the community commitment to enrolling children in the school.
4. Operates in a fiscally responsible manner as residents have voting control over the annual tuition rate.
5. Enhances local control through school choice.
6. Sustains itself as an independent school by offering the highest quality program to ensure each child has the very best experience possible, which facilitates maintaining and expanding its enrollment.

In January 2013 the Vermont State Board of Education authorized the establishment of The Village School of North Bennington as an approved independent school. In June 2013 the Prudential Committee following the directive of its citizenry, voted to close the North Bennington Graded School effective June 30, 2013. On July 1, 2013 The Village School of North Bennington officially opened as an independent day school serving children in grades K-6.

District Data

Data Point	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	Ave.% Chg
Education Spending	\$1,841,688	\$1,953,380	\$2,120,794	\$2,195,356	\$2,387,566	6.0%
Equalized Pupils	122.76	124.44	124.01	131.21	137.76	2.4%
NBGS Homestead Tax Rate	\$1.54	\$1.66	\$1.79	\$1.72	\$1.72	2.3%

Current Educational Structure in North Bennington

The North Bennington Graded School District is a non-operating school district serving children in Pre-K programs through Grade 6. As a non-operating district resident parents are afforded school choice in grades K-6. Secondary students (Grades 7-12) attend Mount Anthony Middle and High School, as school choice does not currently exist for resident children at the secondary level. The Village School of North Bennington currently occupies the former Graded School Building under a lease agreement negotiated between the Prudential Committee and the Board of Trustees of The Village School.



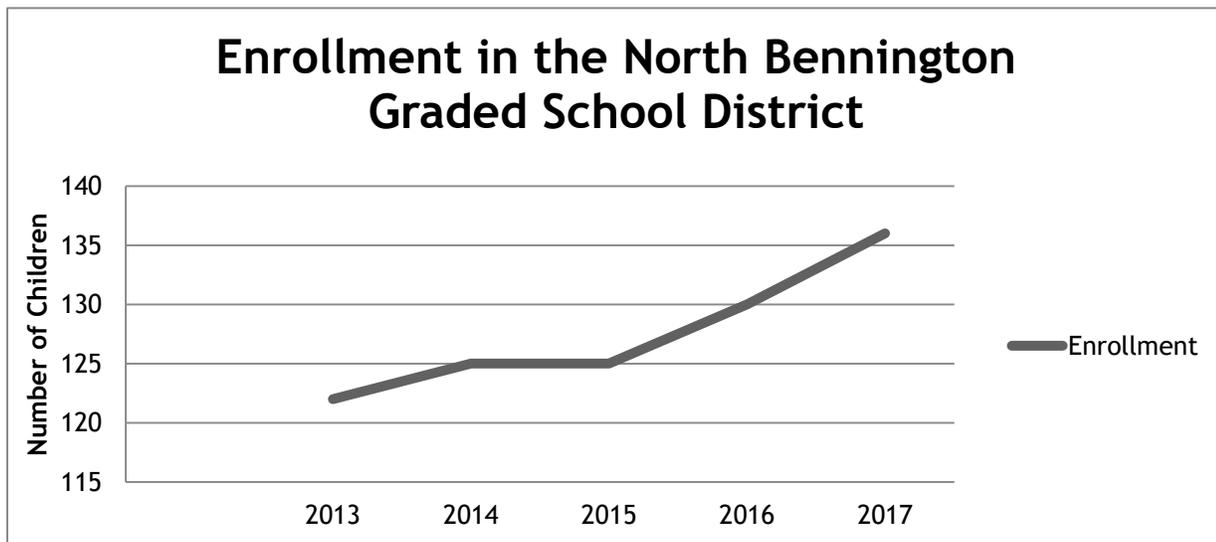
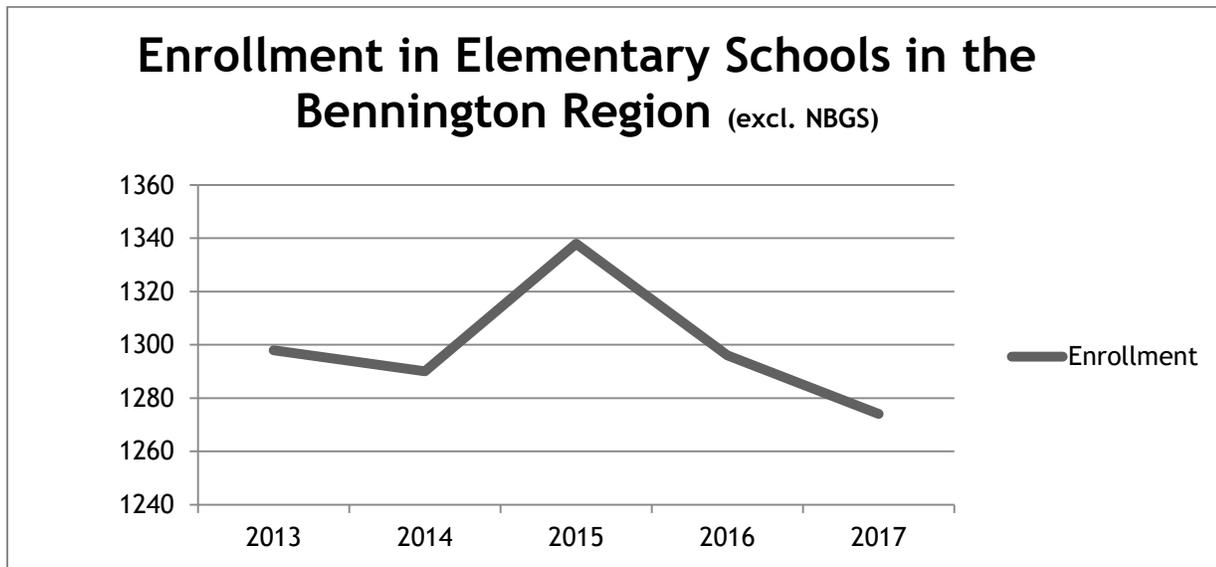
Vermont Governor Phil Scott's Visit to VSNB in January 2017

The Prudential Committee, through its most recent self-evaluation has identified four goals as part of its current strategic plan:

- 7. Sustaining a community based school accessible to all resident children.
- 8. Growing student population numbers to support the community based school.
- 9. Retain school choice as a principal component of our governance structure.
- 10. Expanding school choice to include secondary age students residing in the North Bennington Graded School District.

School enrollment is a vital component to the first three goals adopted by the Prudential Committee. The Prudential has been very encouraged by enrollment data over the past five years since transitioning to a non-operating governance model. Breaking with Vermont statewide enrollment trends that show a declining school-age population, the five-year trend in the North Bennington Graded School District clearly indicates a vibrant growth pattern. The role that school choice plays is this pattern becomes evident when comparing enrollment data from the North Bennington Graded School District with its non-operating governance structure and the remaining elementary districts in the region. Over a four-year period beginning in 2013 when school choice was established in the North Bennington Graded School District, enrollment has risen 12%. During that same period the remaining six elementary school districts in the greater Bennington area have experienced a 2% decline in enrollment. This growth is even more remarkable when considering that due to its relatively small geographic size (approximately 1.4 square miles) there is little undeveloped land within the district boundaries limiting opportunities for new housing.

The enrollment charts on the next page provide a visual illustration of these patterns. In looking at the 2017 school year enrollment data, nineteen of one hundred and thirty-six children registered this past school year in the North Bennington Graded School District are attending elementary schools around the greater Bennington area. These schools are chosen by the parents and reflect the parent's assessment of which school program best meets the needs of their individual children. The remaining resident children are attending The Village School of North Bennington as parents have designated this school as best meeting the needs of their children.



Educational Programming in North Bennington

As we completed the self-examination for Section 9 of Act 46 we were particularly attentive to the Five Educational Goals outlined in Act 46. We are particularly pleased at how effectively our school choice governance structure has addressed each of these goals as outlined in the Act.

Five Educational and Fiscal Goals of Act 46

1. ***“Provide substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities.”***
2. ***“Lead students to achieve or exceed the State’s Education Quality Standards.”***
3. ***“Maximize operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources.”***
4. ***“Promote transparency and accountability.”***
5. ***“Deliver educational services at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value.”***

Our self-evaluation led us to find agreement with the substance of most of these goals. We are pleased to report that our self-evaluation has led us to the conclusion that the North Bennington Graded School District is on a clear path to compliance with these stated goals particularly in the areas where our community’s beliefs are congruent with the stated objectives.

Starting from the early work done by our district on school governance, we were focused on many of the issues stated in the goals of Act 46.

1. The 136 K-6 children residing in the North Bennington Graded School district find excellent educational opportunities through the school choice afforded them. Nineteen children from our district have accessed a wide spectrum of educational programming including a traditional public elementary school (Shaftsbury), Pine Cobble in Massachusetts, Hiland Hall in Bennington, and Southshire Community School in North Bennington. *(Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5)*
2. Each of these schools offers a rich and unique experience meeting the needs of these children in a manner that reflects the hopes and aspirations of the parent and the child. *(Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)*
3. The remaining 117 K-6 children from North Bennington are attending our local Town Academy, The Village School of North Bennington. Equity is assured as all resident children are guaranteed admission to VSNB. *(Goal 1)*
4. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges has accredited The Village School of North Bennington following an exhaustive review of their program, finances, and curricular offerings. This accreditation provides assurance to our community that the school is meeting the very highest standards in all aspects of school operations. *(Goals 1 and 2)*
5. The Village School of North Bennington is approved by the Vermont Agency of Education to provide Special Education services to children with special needs (all

categories) ensuring that children in our community equal access to our village school. *(Goals 1 and 2)*

6. VSNB also provides a comprehensive meal service for all children including breakfast, lunch, and snacks that is approved by the USDA school lunch program. *(Goals 1, 2, 4, and 5)*
7. VSNB offers an approved Pre-K school, and wrap around childcare services to support families who have needs beyond the traditional school curriculum. *(Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)*
8. The Village School's independent governance structure has provided expanded opportunities to partner with organizations in our community. These partnerships have grown educational opportunities for our students while "maximizing operational efficiencies through increased flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources. *(Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)*

The list below will demonstrate the creative use and sharing of local resources already in place, and constantly expanding (Goal 3 of Act 46).

Partnerships include the Vermont Arts Exchange, Hiland Hall Gardens, Bennington College and the Strings Program:



The Vermont Arts Exchange has been engaging the community through creativity since 1994. Executive Director and Co-Founder, Matthew Perry has brought his passion for art and creativity to our community school through a partnership that has the VAE providing artistic instruction to all students attending VSNB. This partnership provides the highest quality educational experience for children by exposing them to an expansive range of artistic and creative experiences.



Hiland Hall

Hiland Hall Gardens Hiland Hall Gardens and The Village School of North Bennington have created a partnership during the first year of the school's operation. These historic gardens provide a unique opportunity for children to learn about how food is produced in manner that supports a healthy lifestyle. The gardens are a living laboratory for the school that includes extensive trails, a pond, as well as a greenhouse. Children are actively growing food that is then brought to the school and incorporated into the school lunch program.



Bennington College has partnered with The Village School of North Bennington since it began operations in 2013. Students in grades K-6 at VSNB are enrolled in foreign language classes taught by advanced foreign language students from Bennington College. Languages taught include French, Spanish, and Mandarin. In addition to foreign language, the college and VSNB have ongoing projects in history, music, civics, energy

conservation, and public engagement.



VSNB Students at a String Concert

The String Program at The Village School of North Bennington exemplifies equity, quality, and variety of educational opportunities. Currently (44) children participate in the String Program at VSNB. District residents who were committed to ensuring that children have the opportunity to learn about and participate in string based music program established the now 25 year old program. It is now under the direction of a community based not-for-profit. Many of the instruments used were fashioned by local instrument craftsman. The program is open to all children who have an interest in string music.

Strategic Plan for the Educational Structure in North Bennington as called for in Act 46:

The state's response to the fiscal pressures brought about by the declining school age population in Vermont has been a long-standing concern for our community and the school district. The state's clear policy response to the eroding school age population and resulting fiscal pressure is consolidation. This policy manifested itself in the form of Act 46. It was our community's prediction of the emergence of this policy and the resulting legislation that provided the catalyst for our extensive work on school governance. At the core of this self-study is the belief that our community should be the primary decision maker with regards to the planning and implementation of our school governance structure. The vast experience that the numerous community partners who participated in this process validated that decisions made closest to the point of service are often the most effective.

As we consider the future of our community and its school district under centralizing requirements imposed by Act 46, we considered very carefully our community's historic commitment to local control. As stated earlier in this report, we put forth clearly identified our goals as we move forward considering the structure of school governance in the North Bennington Graded School District.

1. Sustaining a community based school accessible to all resident children.
2. Growing student population to support that community based school.
3. Retaining school choice as a principal component of our governance structure.
4. Expanding school choice to include secondary age students residing in the North Bennington Graded School District.

On November 7, 2017 a vote on proposed governance structure in five of the six component school districts of the Southwest Vermont Supervisory District was held. The North Bennington Graded School District did not participate in this vote, as an advisable district and the only non-operating school district within the SVSU. The proposal as presented was defeated by the voters on November 7th creating uncertainty for the future of school governance within SVSU. At the writing of this report, one of the component school districts in response to a petition has scheduled a revote on January 9th, 2018. The outcome of this vote will not be known at the time of submission of this report.

The uncertainty in our current SU, our current non-operating governance structure, and our commitment to preserve and, if possible, expand school choice has led us to investigate other options as provided in Act 46 during our self-study process.

We have met and talked extensively with representatives from the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union and its component school districts. We have been excited to discover a shared set of beliefs as well as a common vision for the future, leading us to develop a common purpose for the future of education in our communities.

In its Section 9 Report, the Self-Study Committee for the Arlington School District is proposing a five-year pilot program that will be developed and implemented by the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union (BVSU). This program will be characterized by the following:

1. The Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union will be reconfigured. BVSU’s new configuration will include the Arlington School District (current member), the Sandgate School District (current member), and the North Bennington Graded School District (new member).
2. The North Bennington Graded School District would cease affiliation with the SVSU and would become a component school district of the newly configured BVSU.
3. To comply with the requirements of Act 46, Sec. 5(b), the North Bennington Graded School District would withdraw from the Mount Anthony Unified Union thereby transforming NBGS to a non-operating governance structure in grades PK-12. This change would transform NBGS into one of the four most common operating/tuitoning structures, i.e. PK-12 non-operating.
4. This chart summarizes the governance structure of the newly configured SU.

<u>School Districts</u>	<u>Governance Structure</u>	<u>Schools</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>
Arlington School District	Operating	Fisher Elementary Arlington Jr. Sr. High School	367
Sandgate	Non-operating	NA	52
North Bennington Graded School District	Non-operating	NA	270

1. This proposal would increase the size of the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union to 689 students (ADM).
2. This proposal would permit a more streamlined approach to governance for the remaining school districts in the SVSU. The withdrawal of NBGSD as a non-operating school district leaves 4 operating school districts that can combine into a unified union district as a MUUSD without NBGSD attached with its different equity opportunity structure.
3. This proposal would increase the student enrollment of the BVSU creating greater efficiencies. The analysis completed by the Arlington Section 9 report indicates that projected costs in the newly configured SU would decrease \$327 per student or 39%.

Conclusion

We fully support the recommendations of the Arlington School District Sec. 9 report to reconfigure the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union to include the North Bennington Graded School District. We are excited to join with them in requesting from the State Board of Education of five-year extension as a newly configured SU.

Appendix (see email attachments)

List of Meeting Dates and Attendees

Meeting Minutes of Southwest Vermont Carousel Board Meeting. Sep. 27, 2017

Supplemental List of Meeting Dates

Arlington School District Study Committee Report