

April 11, 2014

Our commitment is to building strong schools that strengthen our communities and provide for the welfare of our children. There are many ways to do this and local voice has been part of the solution when it works well.

With respect to the proposed moratorium, we are concerned that it may cause problems where there weren't any before, by setting up privatization as a threat, where there is little evidence to suggest it is a threat.

Our underlying challenge in the state, for ALL, schools, is responding responsibly to declining enrollments, not privatization.

Several towns have discussed the option of closing their public school and opening a private school as a way to reduce costs and preserve "voice." They would be wise to consider a few factors before pursuing an option like this. First of all, one of the state's major challenges at the moment is overcapacity: we are spending more and more dollars to educate fewer and fewer students. Privatization does not change this underlying economic reality. Secondly, some towns seem to think that if they open a private school, they will draw additional students because they are private. The actual experience of the two towns that did privatize suggests this might be a dangerous assumption. For example:

North Bennington: There are some indications that some of the students who currently attend the Village School of North Bennington may seek to join Shaftsbury. If they succeed in this choice, North Bennington's private school will experience increased financial stress. We won't have data on where North Bennington's students decided to enroll until late August; anecdotally, we hear they lost a few students to other schools. We do know from our meetings with them that they are experiencing financial stress already.

Winhall: Based on the most recent data available, school year 2012-2013, of Winhall's approximately 79 students in grades K-8, approximately 20 of those attend the Mountain School located in Winhall while 23 attend other private schools. The other 26 of the town's children attend public school outside of Winhall. The Mountain School has been unable to retain all the students in town, and Winhall now has 1) more students attending private schools other than the private school the town set up to replace its public school, and 2) more students attending public school in other towns than attend the private school they set up.



In sum, towns should not assume that privatization would keep their small school open in town. In an era of overcapacity, situations rarely work out as we would prefer. The market will determine what happens to private schools with insufficient enrollment.

The real danger is that small districts will fall into this situation a few at a time, rarely with more than one or two in a supervisory union. The majority of districts in these supervisory unions may be doing well and see no need for change. Over time, a few districts at a time, VT students will see significant declines in their education experience associated with the decreasing viability of their schools. This process will continue until the number of districts, isolated in their supervisory unions, reaches a critical mass that leads to statewide action. The negative effects on the children these districts serve are likely to be substantial.

