

Small School District Collaboration Instead of Consolidation  
Sarah M. Peacock, Isle La Motte School Director

Cooperative small school districts in Vermont have incredible flexibility. Grand Isle Supervisory Union has been practicing a cooperative model for many years. Sharing resources. Creatively solving problems. Generating novel answers to old questions. GISU is able to provide exemplary educational opportunities to its students by sharing teaching resources. Sharing ideas. Sharing creativity.

Each district within GISU acknowledges that our joint survival depends on each other. Each district in the SU brings different skills. Different backgrounds. Different strengths. Roughly twenty school directors bringing all of their tools and talents to the table for the benefit of GISU, volunteering on behalf of their communities. Each district in GISU is inherently different. Each board has its own identity and successfully serves its school and town by understanding its students, its residents, and the resources necessary to build a solid educational program that reaches every student. Any consolidation or elimination of school districts effectively decreases the voluntary human resource pool that exists for the benefit of the union. Small districts would receive the least representation. While this model seems efficient under a consolidated system, it unfortunately makes the smallest district the most vulnerable in the working of the consolidated district. It takes away the voice of the smallest school. Even if that voice makes the best music.

There is a reason why over 80% of Vermont's school budgets passed this month. They were presented by local boards, our neighbors and friends. Small towns, small schools, small districts passed their school budgets. Not because people want double digit percentage increases to their property taxes but because they know that their neighbors, their fellow taxpayers, their school directors did the best that they could for them. Small school district taxpayers also understood that the state has an "X" placed on their school because it's not big enough. Not a high enough equalized pupil count. This message was being broadcast throughout the media. However, to each town, their school is the centerpiece of the community. The taxpayers support that centerpiece.

In tiny Isle La Motte, we have a school that achieves Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. A preschool Teacher of the Year. We are the only Platinum level member of the VT Safe Routes to School program. We installed a grant-provided solar panel system to counter high electricity costs. We boast an incredibly gifted staff and a passionate board. We have a pre-K - 6 school budget that has decreased each year for the last three years while continuing to improve output year after year. In fact, if members of other locations had school choice, I am confident that our doors would be bursting with what the state likes to call equalized pupils but which we like to call "our kids". Instead of calculating the savings in our destruction, the state should be taking a closer look at small schools, small districts and small supervisory unions to find out how we've managed to survive for so long. And how, under increasing state pressure, we are delivering on every variable for which we are put to the test - except per pupil spending, with a formulation and accounting so complicated, that only a handful of people actually understand it.

The best way to disengage the taxpayers from the process is to take away their school board. This is especially true in small towns where we see our neighbors, fellow tax payers, and board directors regularly. Removing local boards is inevitably going to cause a much higher increase in failed budgets. It will be masked under numbers but the unrest will remain. If this consolidation cannot be shown to save significant tax payer funds, I think it falls under the category of just "doing something".

I firmly believe that as Vermonters we understand that bigger is not better. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. "Small" is not inherently bad. "Small" is not always expensive. "Small" is resourceful. "Small" is malleable. "Small" is cooperative. "Small" is smart. "Small" is fierce. "Small" is strong. And most importantly "small" is quick to adapt, which makes it incredibly difficult to discourage.

I urge this committee not to rush into governance change for the sole purpose of "doing something" but to look closely at districts and supervisory unions individually for answers to what works and what does not work. Legislating consolidation is not smart business. Especially for our school districts. And most assuredly it does not come with guarantees of reduced property taxes.