

Public Comment

Diane Kirson-Glitman Mount Mansfield Union School District board member, Chittenden East Supervisory Union board member, VSBA board member regional representative for Chittenden Grand Isle. diane.kirson-glitman@cesuvt.org

I am in support of the intent of the bill to restructure school governance structure. I am enthusiastic about being part of a pre-K-12 board that can truly have all the players at the table to make the necessary decisions for all of the students in our community. CESU is undertaking a voluntary merger endeavor to consolidate all the sending districts for the single high school to which we currently send our students. The merger discussions have been delicate. Building trust and hearing other viewpoints has been a challenge. **We need to be assured that if we do bring this relatively simple merger to fruition that it will be fully endorsed and valid under the new legislation and not be designed into something else in 2019.**

I attended school in Maryland under a county system. We were passionate about our neighborhood schools but under a county system we did not own them. **I underestimated the complications in terms of emotion and proprietary concerns that the “asset” of a school, its personnel and curriculum engenders.** This has made understanding the resistance to consolidation challenging for me. I can imagine education that transcends town borders while many in Vermont cannot. However, I am here at the table with others raised in intimate town schools and have not done too badly for having graduated from a high school of 2400 students in 3 grades.

My passion lies in improving education. I fully support the concept of public education while understanding the delivery, the institution it has become, has drawbacks. **I endorse choice of multiple education settings.** Children are born to learn and the education setting should make them thrive and for many it does not. **To engage all learners and to move public education forward, competition is necessary.** The institution of public education should always be a bit uncomfortable. Vermont’s independent and public/private schools have provided alternative education settings for general education that give choice and new opportunities for student success and curriculum innovation. I want that to stay as we move forward in the governance changes. I am one of the few in my district that see consolidation as a way to offer different education themes/ magnet schools within our district. **I am weary of us trying to do the exact same thing in each of our buildings with shrinking enrollments and getting the exact same amount of engagement and success.** We keep teaching to the middle even as we change the emphasis. There has to be a better way to capture the students in the corners of the “boxes” in our schools.

I would like to see this legislation include choice in a couple of ways. The first is to ensure that full public high school choice can be realized. No town that has had a choice such as Westford, (see letter submitted by Martha Heath) should have that choice limited. They may combine with Essex for governance of the Westford School, but surely we can simply add to the available spots in their traditional choice public high schools to ensure they keep the current choice options. It should not be an issue. The same is true for any district that has had traditionally chosen between two or more public high schools. I thought that was the purpose of the high school choice legislation was it not? We are creative, we can fix that issue.

The second is the situation of the 91 or so “choice towns”. As a resident of Chittenden County, I do not get to use public dollars for an independent school. A choice I wished I did have for my second child who struggled with the public school system and would have preferred a slower pace of learning. But these general education independent approved schools serve essential purposes for their towns, their students and for healthy competition. However I do believe it is time to ask them to pay or play. It is time to ask them all to come up to minimum standards to accept public funding. S.91’s guiding principles come into play here. We need to ask these schools to declare if they want to be part of the public funding system and if so, declare them public charter schools, hold them to some minimum standards (see S.91 currently inactive in the senate education committee) and be done with it. Those who wish to remain private may do so and not receive the public funding. I would appreciate if this issue could be rolled into the proposed legislation. It would be phenomenal if this option was also available for Chittenden County schools such as the Waldorf, Renaissance School or Red Cedar School but that might be a long shot on the wish list.

Proper legislation around public dollars for choice would also alleviate issues such as Grand Isle which suffers from families declaring that town their new residence at 9th grade to take advantage of moving public dollars to private academies. Let’s put an end to it with the legislation. Public dollars can go to public charters in the general education category but not private schools **unless we want that benefit for all Vermonters**, not just those in choice towns. The current system is inequitable.

Governance change has my support but needs to keep the student and education in the front of the conversation and not get distracted by what the adults in the room find difficult to lose or change.

Having said that, one other issue surfaced in the VSBA regional meeting this week and that is that many citizens feel the legislature or administration has not adequately made a case for the need to change governance. Many focus on the issue being a fault with the funding. I think the legislature, administration and Secretary of Education may need to address this even further than they may feel they have done thus far and publicize those efforts.

