

House Education Testimony on Education Governance Proposals (3/18/2014)

My name is Bill Storz. I am a citizen of Vermont and a parent of three children. Two of my children currently attend Vermont schools. I have been a member of the Kirby School Board for the past five years. I am also a licensed Special Educator, and have taught in both public and independent schools in Vermont. I have been teaching for the last seven years for the Community High School of Vermont. I appreciate the opportunity to address the House Education committee's proposals on Education governance reform from these multiple and related perspectives.

My family and I chose to move to Vermont in 2002. My wife and I were both teaching in schools in South Carolina, and my son had finished second grade the summer we moved up here. We chose Vermont because we wanted to live in New England, near our extended families, and we wanted to live in a place that is, as they say, a good place to raise children. For us this meant largely *the quality of the schools*. We were particularly intrigued with what we saw as the equity of Act 60/68, attempting to make sure that all schools had the resources to educate their children. After spending years in South Carolina, with a great contrast from one school to another in the way of resources, this initiative appeared to be a noble attempt at fairness and equity in this most sacred duty of educating children. We wanted to live in a place that lived values such as these. The Vermont schools that we worked in and our children began to attend were a breath of fresh air after our experience in South Carolina. There is an obvious belief in education here that permeates deeply into the social fabric. Much of this is expressed in the bond between communities and their schools, but it is deeper than that. Vermonters value education, and that is expressed in the state as a whole, and the local level, where schools are governed and resources provided. The educational system as it stands now also does very well statistically for its children when compared with other states in the nation, especially considering Vermonters' per capita income. I would argue that much of what is excellent about Vermont schools is due to the current and longstanding governance structure, which encourages very direct connections between communities and their schools. While I appreciate the legislature's efforts to increase to increase equity of access and opportunity for students, I would suggest that the consolidation suggested in this draft bill (14-742) would be in many ways counterproductive to this stated goal. I would ask the legislature respect the governance structures as they stand now, and not make radical changes that I believe would negatively impact both student outcomes and the costs of K-12 education in Vermont.

Kirby closed its Elementary School in 1978. Since then it has operated a system that has allowed for parents and students to choose between a number of options for education, including independent schools. Kirby currently has 94 students who attend a total of 15 distinct schools. The diverse offerings work very well for our students and our parents. Parents and students are empowered to choose a school that matches the child's learning style, has the right curricular approach, has the arts or athletic opportunities that the student and/or parent desires. If a student is truly struggling at a school, sometimes our parents will opt for a different school, and that change of environment and approach to learning itself often solves problems that would in some cases likely require evaluation

for Special Education services. Overall, the parents in our town are very happy with our system. We have received no complaints from parents regarding their child's schooling in the five years that I have been on the school board. Any negative comments that we receive, and we don't get many, are inevitably about the budget, and the state education financing system. Student assessment data confirms that our system works very, very well for our students, when compared with regional and statewide results. Our Special Education costs, a large driver for any district, are relatively low as well, in my opinion due in part to the system of choice that empowers parents to find the best educational match for their child, and to problem solve on their own, if they so choose. Independent schools play an important role in the mix of options, as their differing approaches add truly diverse choices for parents, and sometimes truly alternative solutions for students who are struggling. If school choice as it exists now, including both public and approved independent schools, disappears under any new governance system, Kirby students and parents will lose. I believe that our costs will go up, and the effectiveness of our educational system, including our achievement results, will be diminished. Our simple system, which is essentially "the money follows the child" could rather be an effective model to utilize with any considered changes that the legislature is contemplating.

Kirby is growing, if slowly. If population issues are prominent in the education discussion, perhaps that would suggest that the legislature look at school choice as a state-wide driver for potential population growth, as a trend occurring now that may be of value to the state as a whole. Pushing School Choice out of the educational equation in Vermont would likely push many families out of the state. Expanding School Choice options, by building on what is already working, could attract families to Vermont, and serve as a foundation for overall growth in Vermont. It certainly would increase student opportunities, as your draft bill asserts as an important goal. I would add that the average per pupil spending amount for non operating districts such as Kirby is lower than almost every other category the AOE keeps. And Kirby itself is very close to the average for these districts. So we, as many of the other non-operating districts do, spend less, and at the same time we feel that the student outcomes we get are excellent.

This bill appears to be addressing a crisis that I would argue does not exist. Vermont is one of the best places in the nation for children to be educated. By many, many measures Vermont students do very well when compared to peers around the country. For a state that is largely rural, and with limited resources overall, this shows a remarkable commitment to educating our children, from the smallest towns to the State House. Why are we proposing to radically alter the structure of something that is working so well? We put much of value at risk by doing so, and it is very difficult to see a rationale for doing that.

The Governance bill as it stands now appears to be built on a number of assumptions, such as: *The best solutions come from the top down. Bigger is better. Bigger is more efficient. Bigger creates more opportunities. Schools operate best on a business model. Centralized governance somehow creates greater sensitivity to local needs. Centralizing school governance is a win win scenario.* I disagree with all of these implied assumptions.

Education is not a factory where efficiency may be an effective guiding principle. Education is much more complex. And even in the business world there is research that indicates approaches that emphasize qualities such as creativity over efficiency can end up getting better overall results. There are similar intangibles with respect to education. Local connections with respect to governance and schooling in general appear to me to be one indicator for success. To assume that by breaking those bonds and establishing larger, more “efficient” systems you will necessarily create better outcomes for children is misguided. Greater transportation needs are also not very “efficient”, I would add, and they have been shown to have a negative impact on student achievement. Centralizing the governance structure, and eliminating local boards, does seem “efficient”, but at the cost of local accountability and community connectedness. The traditions of that community, and the rights of that community to decide how to best educate their children may be lost. And with it may be lost support for investing time and tax money into their children’s education. Why distance people from the governance of their schools, without an extremely compelling reason to do so? I don’t see a good reason, really. I believe that the closer the community is to the school, in every way, the more effective the educational outcomes are likely to be for their children. The web of supports and complex connections throughout the current system is a reflection of Vermont values and largely responsible for the current success of Vermont students. It may not look pretty, and it may be a pain for superintendents, but it works well for students.

The world of education is faddish, and teachers are generally skeptical of new ideas, having seen wave after wave of trends that come from new standards, new leadership, new business models, new top-down mandates, etc. Many of these great ideas end up in the dustbin pretty quickly, and for good reason. The fact that Vermont’s governance system has been successful for so long, through so many changes in education is a positive phenomenon which should be respected, not dismissed as old fashioned or out of date. It would be one thing if this durable and effective system were being dismissed in favor of an obviously superior newer model, so to speak. This does not appear to be the case at all. Is there any research that would indicate that centralization of school governance, such as you propose, has effected a positive transformation of a state or large district, producing generally better outcomes for students? In education “research-based” interventions are considered much more valid and potentially useful than proposals that appear to be good ideas, but that have not been tried. With the importance of this idea of transforming the whole state’s educational system, I would hope that the legislature would do due diligence with respect to research on similar efforts to reform governance systems as a whole so as to eliminate the possibility of unintended and negative consequences which could result from action taken based on assumptions and/or the specific and narrow perspectives of certain stakeholders. It would only make sense to move forward if the legislature found research indicating overall success for students in numerous similar situations. Without significant evidence strongly supporting the proposed changes, it would seem impossible for Vermonters to support them. What are the specific opportunities for students that will improve under your proposal? What opportunities will possibly be lost at the same time? What exactly are the outcomes for students that this body is looking to facilitate? And are the governance changes that you are proposing proven to be effective at achieving those

goals? The bar should be set high for your case to Vermonters because overall the system is working well for students, as it stands now.

It appears to me that the research on this issue is mixed at best, generally revealing that the appealing idea of centralization is not the panacea that it might appear to be, and that in fact it can be counterproductive to both achievement and fiscal goals. Efficiency does not necessarily mean greater opportunity for students, for example, and it may mean less. Sometimes redundancy is the better principle for success. Take the US governmental structure. Hardly efficient, but that is not its main purpose. Checks and balances are a kind of redundancy that assures to some extent that voices are heard in the process, and that in the end the majority rules. If you are looking for fiscal efficiency, you may find it in certain narrow ways, though I think schools and districts are already working hard to achieve it where they can, but please do not confuse this efficiency with opportunity for students. I would argue that a focus on “efficiency” could reduce student opportunities significantly.

It should be a matter of pride that Vermont has the highest ratio of school board members to students. It is a reflection of the value that Vermonters place on education, as well as the local traditions of responsibility for education. If that’s inefficient then democracy is inefficient. Another statistic that gets talked about often with respect to education in Vermont is class size, as in “we have the smallest class size...” I believe that most Vermont teachers would say that small class size, within certain parameters, is a huge factor for success of students. While it might be appealing, or efficient, to put 28 first graders together in a classroom, you would almost guarantee greater outcomes over time, and greater educational opportunities for all of them, by splitting them into two classes of 14. I suppose that might be considered inefficient, but...

As a Special Educator whose mission is facilitating access to education for all, I applaud the committee’s focus on equity. I can see that centralization of Special Education resources has some advantages, as you describe, but there are also disadvantages. Centralization means less on-the-ground knowledge of the nuances of each student’s learning situation, less familiarity with the regular education resources at hand, and, from the important perspective of the parent, a potentially greater problem in responsiveness to their inquiries on behalf of their child. In a smaller structure the parent feels comfortable problem-solving with the school and the local SPED teacher, and problems may be solved more immediately and appropriately without the need for expensive interventions. The more centralized the administration of Special Education becomes, the more distance the parent feels between themselves and the potential solutions to their problem. I have seen some extremely inappropriate IEPs which appear to be the result of lack of immediate knowledge of the student, and lack of respect and/or knowledge for local school conditions. Though the resources of a larger, shared SPED structure may improve, and that might look good from an administrative perspective, I would suggest that what could be lost in a centralized model in terms of local problem solving ability would drive student outcomes downward overall, and end up costing much more. Localized solutions often solve problems before they become big enough to need Special Education services.

While considering this bill's broad reach one thinks of No Child Left Behind. Dianne Ravitch was originally a part of the group that pioneered that legislation. She has since disavowed it, and now finds that it has been very counterproductive and burdensome to education in America. No Child Left Behind was originally built on the narrative of "failing schools" which Ms. Ravitch also now believes to be essentially untrue. Large changes are easier to force through with less scrutiny if one believes that the system one is addressing is failing and in a crisis. After all, any change will likely be an improvement, and why wait any longer? The NCLB legislation, with arguably some good intentions, could be said to have created many more problems than it solved and it has certainly hamstrung teachers and schools, narrowing their focus, and preventing them in many cases to deliver the education that they believed was best for all of their students. The state of education in Vermont can not remotely be seen as in a crisis, unless one looks narrowly at school finance. Any proposed changes should recognize this, respect the elements of the system that are in place and therefore responsible for current success, and proceed from there to find ways for improvement.

The impression that one gets right now is that the Legislature is intent on making huge changes to the educational governance system, whether or not the majority of Vermonters are on board with their proposals. I remember clearly just a few years ago, when similar forced consolidation proposals were being discussed in Montpelier, an overwhelming number of people giving testimony against making such changes, as well as supporting local control of education in general. There were one or two supporters of the legislator's proposals, and well over one hundred dissenters at one particular hearing in Montpelier. The voluntary approach to consolidation legislation that eventually emerged from those proposals was not utilized very much either. I would think that the legislature might understand from all this that the people of Vermont, including many within the educational establishment itself, do not want forced consolidation. And the thought might follow from that that Vermonters as a whole value their educational system *as it is*, and are skeptical of the idea of centralization as necessary to improvement. It surprises me that this is being revisited, frankly. I think the ideas in the governance proposal are not sound, and that, if they are informed, Vermonters will not support them. I also believe that if forced consolidation gains support and does pass it will be a loss for communities and the educational outcomes for their children, and that if the proposals go forward without support it will be a disaster. I am hopeful that with attention paid to the citizens of Vermont and the varying stakeholders, modest reform, if any, will be undertaken to address issues in more specific, targeted way.

I do think some fiscal efficiency could be gained in Vermont education by combining and centralizing some business office tasks, and perhaps personnel issues, teacher recruitment, professional development, etc. Much of this is happening on a local level, and possibly could be expanded. I would also applaud the committee for the focus on 21st Century Skills and for the language that supports "expanding opportunities for school choice to all public schools and eligible independent schools within the district." This could improve access to educational opportunities and create the better student/school matching that I have observed in Kirby. I would ask the committee this: Does "eligible" in this instance means the same thing as "approved"?

I can see why Superintendents would support this bill. They do have a tough job in Vermont, and are deserving of consideration. Their perspective appears to be well represented in the bill. What appears to be missing, as it stands now, is some on-the-ground perspective, from parents, teachers, and students themselves. This is extremely vital input. I would urge the committee to listen to these voices in particular as it proceeds.

In summary, I would urge the House Education to recognize that the current governance system is helping Vermont students to achieve success and opportunities as it stands now, that local school boards and community connections are a vital part of this success, that Vermonters are largely supportive of their local educational systems and the statewide systems that support them, that allowing greater freedom of choice for parents and students within the systems that exist now, including independent schools, would be a very direct and effective way to increase opportunities for students, and that any significant changes that they would pursue to educational governance would have focused goals, and be based on both validated research and the will of the Vermont people. Thank you for listening and I do sincerely apologize if I have been redundant! I wish you the best as you tackle these vitally important and complex issues.

Bill Storz, Kirby