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Vermont Principal of the Year 1996

Rural School and Community Trust 2002 - present www.ruraledu.org

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1. The proposal should clearly define the problems to be solved. Is the intention to reduce costs? Address a leadership crisis? Create administrative efficiency? Provide for smoother data collection and comparisons? Provide equity of opportunity? All of this and more? This is a fundamental change in our school governance system I am concerned that there is confusion about purpose and a public assumption that savings will result. If reducing cost is the purpose you should come out and say it and define how it will produce savings. If we are not delivering on this how can we get buy in for fundamental change? Currently the proposal is a solution without clear definition. For the work to gain public support problem definition and clarity are key. I am sure you understand that this will be the education agenda for the next 5 years and that other priorities, will take a back seat to this conversation. In 5 years what do you want people to say this legislation has accomplished? The answer address's the heart of this proposal; this will be your legacy. Is the purpose to address the opportunity gap? If so, how does positioning the change in governance terms help or hinder the outcome? When I look at the stated purpose I am confused. I need to know - What are the key issues? How will each one be tackled within the legislation? What are the expected outcomes for each issue? How will we know we have achieved them? Ron Heifetz talks about technical solutions for technical problems and adaptive solutions for adaptive problems. What part of the problems Vermont faces are technical and need technical solutions and what part are adaptive and need flexible adaptive solutions?

http://www.cambridge-leadership.com/index.php/about_us/staff/heifetz/

2. We need to do our homework.

It would seem wise to review of the research on consolidation and take heed of it, prior to designing a plan. We are on shaky ground. Maine has faced major pitfalls and unintended consequences from a proposal similar to this in recent years. It would be helpful to review evidence for each of the issues around which you wish to create change and reach clarity of purpose based on facts.

<http://umaine.edu/cre/2013/03/13/fairman-publishes-paper-on-school-consolidation/>

<https://bangordailynews.com/2012/02/20/education/was-maines-school-consolidation-endeavor-a-success/>

National sources make clear recommendations –

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/consolidation-schools-districts>

Concludes the smaller the school the better performance of children in poverty.

<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED512638>

3. We can do better. Faced with many of the same issues Scandinavia, New Zealand and many other countries have been decentralizing educational governance, much of it to the school level since the 90's. We currently have successes that can provide models, pockets of stable leadership and efficiencies. What makes one model appropriate for everyone given each community's different history, geography and population base? Because we all look different a "one-size fits all" approach is inappropriate. An alternative proposal could be crafted that unleashes local creativity and problem solving. It could combine tight solutions to issues like comparative data collection and centralize a number of functions reducing the number of superintendents in the process. It could decentralize to the school level other issues and respect the value of local control. We do not all need to follow the same journey to the same outcomes. Instead we need to be crystal clear about the outcomes expected and allow flexible, locally designed, adaptive change towards their realization.

<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/Norway.pdf> see page 12-14

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/40553301.pdf>

http://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/20331/1/MPRA_paper_20331.pdf

Focus is the positive impact of decentralization on student achievement

http://www.seceducoop.net/education_in/pdf/decentr_educ_why_when_what_how_oth_enl_t07.pdf

4. Democracy matters to Vermonters. When my colleague Marty Strange testified on this topic in 2009 he stated the following. Nothing has changed, this is a fundamental value to work with, not against.

Democracy matters to people and attempts to veneer over the loss of local control with site management councils, advisory boards, community councils – it doesn't matter what name you use – do not excite public participation. If you think it's hard to get people to run for the school board, wait until you tell them that they can still come to the meetings, they just don't have any power. "Local control" may be a cost driver, but it is also a driver of public support for education. Moreover, "local control" is just the ugly sibling of "local responsibility." People make hard choices before bureaucracies do. Shrinking the public role in school decision making means more failed budgets, more internecine arguing over where the money goes and whose school gets closed by which voters, and reduced public support for education

5. Beware danger lies ahead. Since 2009 we have tried changes via Act 153. We need to analyze and learn from what has worked and what hasn't worked. Act 153 was voluntary and so far Vermonters are not only not buying it, they have been

willing to pay for their decision in their taxes. Listen to the people. Vermonters will not give up a huge portion of representative democracy without being sure the replacement will deliver. Vermonters will see this legislation as building on Act 153 so changing their thinking from - this is about money - to - this is about opportunity, systems efficiency and leadership stability is an additional challenge. I have a big concern about the rush on this legislation, our new Secretary Rebecca Holcombe has barely got her feet on the ground. She has a lot of work to do and an off target governance focused proposal, which gets misinterpreted, could suck the air out of what she is poised to accomplish. It could stall progress across the education sector. I am concerned a rush to privatization could result from this proposal. People will say we have been through this before [Act 153] and we have been telling Montpelier we are not convinced. So instead of listening, they are doubling down and going to make us do this! Confidence in public education could be eroded.

6. Lets work together to get this right. Act 153 did not effect much change but it also has done little harm to public education. This proposal is its successor and it is out the gate as a governance proposal. I believe it will hit a wall of confusion about purpose and lack of clarity, conversation will focus on the specifics of the proposal and a substantive conversation on the issues will be derailed. As is, people will not be willing to give up long held traditions such as local control. A proposal focused on opportunity is a whole different story. Every Vermonter wants opportunity for their child, every community wants to do what's best for their children. A statewide conversation focused on opportunity will engage Vermonters, because Vermonters take their responsibility for public education seriously and given this conversation Vermonters might be willing to embrace changes they have previously been rightly skeptical of. New school quality standards are currently in rule making; an inspectorate system to ensure quality could be step one. Moreover, change with this focus can be accomplished with flexible pathways and equity in this context does not mean each district or school needs to be the same. We need to ensure we have legislation, which enables productive change rather than constrains it or produces unintended consequences. We need legislation that supports our strong foundation of public education and builds on our strength of local community decision-making. With this proposal the stakes are much higher, we need to work together to get this right.

Recommendations

- 1. Slow down**
- 2. Analyze the issues**
- 3. Do our homework**
- 4. Respect fundamental values**
- 5. Develop legislation**

Thank you

"Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving...conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity." — John Dewey