

The first step, let's keep it up

The House Education Committee Friday approved legislation that would change the governance structure of Vermont's schools, giving us the opportunity to significantly improve our educational outcomes at an affordable cost.

It's the most significant piece of school-related legislation in Vermont since Act 60 in 1997.

Its overarching purpose is to move us from a governance system encrusted with more than a century of habits and low expectations to regional preK-12 school districts that are more efficient and built for 21st century educational needs.

As compelling as the need is, for the legislation to be passed will require its defenders to articulate the vision, to explain why the legislation is needed and how it could end up being a social and economic development tool of immeasurable value to the state.

The people who should be leading this charge include not only legislators, but school boards, superintendents, our higher education establishments and the state's business community.

Those who run our schools should be able to explain why the current structure is a poor utilization of resources and how it inhibits the ability to teach our students in ways that match today's workforce needs.

The University of Vermont, the Vermont State Colleges and all other institutions of higher learning should be able to explain why an improved preK-12 system would to their benefit. Presently, we have one of the lowest percentage of high school graduates going on to college in the nation. That has to change.

The business community should be campaigning in favor of this legislation not only for sheer efficiency arguments but for the hope of raising the educational levels of those they may employ.

And then, there is the everyday Vermonter who is often perplexed why it is that we have 30,000 fewer students and school budgets that continue to rise. Two of every three households in Vermont have no children. They are becoming weary of property tax bills that go up faster than their weekly paychecks. This legislation puts in place a structure that, over time, could bend the curve on school spending.

And that leaves who in opposition?

Several groups.

There will be those who perceive it in their best interest to keep our gridlocked system in place. The Vermont NEA is already making such noise.

There will be those, particularly in the state's smallest rural areas, who will oppose it desperately because they think they might lose their schools.

And there will be those who oppose anything that threatens the long-held shibboleth of local control.

Let's consider each of the arguments:

Joel Cook, the head lobbyist for the Vt.NEA, has been quoted as saying he doesn't think there is a problem with school spending levels. He's probably the only person in Vermont who thinks the path we're on is sustainable. He's also not convinced that the new governance structure would improve educational opportunities. In other words, his message is let's not try.

Mr. Cook is paid a smidgen over \$230,000 a year in a state where the average teacher makes \$48,000. The question is whether his view is really something our teachers support. Under the legislation proposed it could also be argued that it gives teachers more flexibility and more job protection since the districts would be larger and under one administration.

As for those concerned about their small schools, it may be that just the opposite would happen. The problem we have is that under our existing structure schools are obligated to be used as they are currently being used. Some of our smaller schools simply are not large enough and the ones that suffer are the students who are not given an education broad enough and deep enough to meet their educational needs. A changed governance structure might allow school districts to use the schools for other blended purposes. That would be the goal.

And then, there are those who make the argument for local control. They argue that making school districts larger makes them more remote and less democratic.

That's just nuts.

Even with the proposed governance structure in place we would still have a stronger student/administrative ratio than anywhere else in the country. And why would we place the myth of local control above the state's need for better schools?

When the arguments of both camps are placed side-by-side the difference between the two is stark: One group is looking forward, asking how we can improve student outcomes, and, how we can do so affordably. The other group is looking backward, steeped in the past, swimming in the current of denial.

There will be countless questions raised as we proceed along this path. If it's approved mistakes will be made. It's all part of progress, which is why the legislation has a seven-year time line.

But the worst mistake we could make would be to not try.

by Emerson Lynn

Consolidation

If nothing is done, Vermont lawmakers will approve a seven-cent increase in the statewide property tax rate, which would be the largest increase ever imposed to fund our schools.

That's not likely. The governor has promised the increase would be less. The House Ways and Means Committee has already proposed a plan that would cut the increase to five cents.

The message from Town Meeting Day was clear to legislators: There is a limit to what Vermonters can afford and that limit has been reached. There is a palpable concern in the statehouse that voters consider present cost trends unsustainable and for legislators to pretend otherwise is as foolhardy as it is insensitive.

The worry, however, is that legislators will act in the moment and not with the foresight necessary to ensure a sustainable, high-quality educational system. The worry is that legislators will be seduced more by immediate cost-cutting measures and forego proposed systemic changes that would set the long term stage for lower costs and improved outcomes.

It's not an either-or-proposition. Both could, and should be done.

On the property tax front, the Legislature will consider, among other things, reducing the small school grants, saving a couple of million dollars. It will also consider increasing the penalties for districts that spend at a rate higher than inflation. It will examine the need to change the income sensitivity program so households earning between \$47,000 and \$90,000, would pay more. It may also consider modifying the calculations that determine a school district's spending per equalized pupil.

Whatever the choices, the outcome will be something that reduces the seven cent increase in the statewide property tax, and it will be something that puts some downward pressure on school spending.

That's helpful, but that's largely an exercise in rearranging what we already have.

There are opportunities that hold more promise.

Our representatives also should give serious consideration to the proposed school consolidation legislation being considered, which would organize education around regional preK-12 districts, thus reducing the number of school districts and supervisory unions.

Of the two, consolidation is the heavier lift. Cutting taxes makes the headlines in a positive way; at least politically. Reorganizing our schools boards and supervisory unions creates headlines in a more controversial way.

But it's the long-term reorganizational effort that provides the framework necessary to change how our schools function, how they can be better managed, how costs can be controlled and how outcomes can be improved.

If all the Legislature does is to cut a grant or two, or impose penalties on high spending schools, it has not dealt with the systemic issues that

contribute to the problem we have. That's kicking the proverbial can down the road.

Think about it. We have 282 school districts and 80 supervisory unions. We have roughly 1,500 school board members for about 80,000 students, or one school board member for every 53 students. No other state has an administrative structure even close to what we have in Vermont. We could cut what we have in place by half, and still be far below the national average.

The consolidation proposal being considered is supported, in large part, by the school board association and the superintendents' association, the two groups best acquainted with the need.

But it's being pilloried in commentary as being "a body blow to local democracy", the tired suggestion that what we had in 1912 is still relevant today, that nothing should change despite the fact we've lost 30,000 students over the last 15 years and that many of our towns are losing population.

Critics contend consolidation would not save money and that it would, in the process, threaten the relationship between teachers and their students.

Please.

The critics are largely apologists for the system we have and offer no thoughts as to how things might be changed for the better, or how our educational system must evolve if it is to stay relevant. If the public approves the school budget, then, they argue, the need to change must not exist. End of discussion.

That's precisely the line of argument that stultifies innovation. Why is it that every other discipline must undergo constant change to remain relevant, but in Vermont we think it prudent to defend a school governance system that's over a century old?

The school consolidation argument is not about saving paper clips. It's about making coordinated decisions more efficiently. It's about using our resources more effectively. It's about giving teachers a higher, more meaningful level of support. It's about improving the level of communication between schools and the public.

These virtues are almost impossible to realize with our current system. We have too many trying to manage too few. That creates a balkanized system which forfeits control to the smallest unit, making it almost impossible to move the system, as a whole, ahead.

We spend enough money on our schools. For that, we should be thankful. It's time now to act on proposals that will help us spend that money more wisely, and with better results.

The school consolidation proposal is a start.

by Emerson Lynn