

March 18, 2014  
Governance DR14-742  
Conrad Smith,  
House Education

TO: Honorable House Education Committee Members  
FROM: Conrad W Smith  
DATE: March 18, 2014

RE: Governance Legislation Proposal

I was an Assistant Attorney General for a number of years and when I retired I became quite involved in public education. I have been the moderator of the Calais School Meeting for three years, a member of the U-32 High School Board of Education for 9 years and am currently the Chair of the Board of the Washington Central Supervisory Union – although I speak here for only myself and not any of those organizations.

I hope you do not enact the consolidation proposals you are now considering because:

- First, for better or worse, Towns and Cities are our “communities.” If I were to ask all of you, “Where are you from?” nearly all would answer with the name of a town or city; not a county or other region. Like it or not, Vermonters are, I think, deeply imprinted with a very local sense of ‘community’.

This is a good thing and our connection with our very local schools is also a good thing. We are fortunate to have a thousand dedicated volunteers on our school boards and thousands more people involved in and concerned with their local schools.

Trying to force people’s sense of ‘community’ into larger areas will damage that sense of community and will push against more than two hundred years of history – lessening, I believe, involvement because of a feeling and a reality of less local control

- Second, while our public schools are doing well, this is a time of excitement and challenge to do more and do better for all of Vermont’s students. Administrators, school boards, parents and concerned citizens have a great deal to do over the next several years to improve (transform, if necessary) our schools to be really ready for this century. We do not need to have the distraction and the diversion of a huge amount of angst and effort over deciding on new Regional Education or Supervisory Districts. Which Towns to include? What to do with that town? How to apportion Board membership and what By-Laws to enact?

I have learned much from our new Superintendent and one thing has been to answer the question he asks when either Board I am on asks for more information or wants a new policy put in place: “I can do it,” he says, but it will take time and effort and there is only so much time and effort so doing it will take away from educating kids. Have you thought carefully about that?”

Enacting this governance legislation and the resultant effort to decide on and make forced consolidation work will necessarily take away from educating our kids – without, I believe, clear benefits.

- Third, the benefits from consolidation are far from clear.

There is very little evidence that consolidation will save money – certainly not necessarily more than can be done under the current system.

Despite protestations that it is not intended, very small schools will likely close as local control is removed. Kids now ride on buses nearly an hour in WCSU to get to school. Small school closures will mean longer bus rides for kids of families who don't have reliable vehicles, or who can't rearrange their schedules, to drop off or pick up their kids. Those kids will have longer bus rides or, if their parents sometimes take them or the car doesn't start, will miss school more. And these are often precisely the kids that may most need to get to school regularly.

More and more equal opportunity is often claimed as a benefit of consolidation and surely there are possibilities for increased opportunities, but we are at the same time touting the opportunities available from digital technology. That technology may well be able to bring as much and as varied opportunity to our small and unconsolidated local schools.

- Fourth, I know it is not directly your committee's responsibility, but adequately funding the Education fund is probably one of the best things that could be done to help education in the future
- Finally, in the last few years, you and the whole legislature have made significant changes to the power local boards and their relationship to Supervisory Unions. We have been working hard on adapting to those changes and doing so in cost efficient ways. Please give those changes and us time to work through them in the least disruptive and least costly ways.