

Testimony of Heidi Spear for House Education Committee
Concerning K-12 District Consolidation
March 18, 2014

I applaud any effort to expand opportunities for our students across Vermont and for greater efficiencies in education delivery. If this proposal included reasonable detail as to what expanded opportunities we would be creating or what savings we would achieve by pursuing this consolidation plan, I would likely support it. Unfortunately, it includes neither.

What the draft proposal does include, to my mind, is another spending loophole that undermines fiscal accountability. As the current draft reads, those who follow this prescription for consolidation, get a tax perk, with any tax increase capped at 5%, even if their spending goes up. This plan does more of what we already have too much of in our education funding system, it jettisons fiscal accountability by granting waivers to some for higher spending levels, while shifting the costs to others. Sweetening the deal of consolidation with such tax protection in the context of our current spending problems and tax difficulties is, I believe, irresponsible.

It is particularly troubling as the work involved in the proposed sweeping consolidation will certainly increase costs before any efficiencies could possibly be gained. Rolling up contracts will undoubtedly increase compensation costs, not lower them, consolidating budgets will involve systems infrastructure and labor expenses, overseeing change management for staff and board consolidation will be draining, time consuming work. Aside from compromising our ability to focus on immediate education delivery priorities and very real needs to contain costs through right sizing, resource sharing and collective purchasing, this sweeping proposal, as it stands, is tantamount to another unfunded mandate.

My belief is that a constructive path toward K-12 alignment and improved student opportunities is not the proposal before me, which exacerbates our current tax and spending problems and reduces elected, independent oversight of school budgets by 50% to upwards of 90%. What we need now is legislation that initiates a K-12 alignment design process that evaluates the barriers to greater efficiencies and opportunities in current supervisory unions and districts. The design team should deliver recommendations for overcoming those barriers to achieve specific expanded opportunities, along with a cost benefit analysis. Any consolidation process must be well defined, with clear purpose and ample supports to deliver the intended results. Proceeding on the basis of the current proposal would be an expensive step toward reduced accountability and unnecessary, distracting turmoil.

Submitted by Heidi Spear
Fayston Elementary School Board Chair