

To: Members of the House and Senate education committees

From: Peter Berger, teacher (Weathersfield School)

### Consolidation: The Costly Fiction

Education policymakers are declaring it a "bad year" for Vermont school budgets. That's because thirty-five were voted down. The fact that 217 budgets were approved doesn't seem to matter as much to state officials.

According to one of those officials, our governor, almost all those defeated budgets included only a modest increase or even a decline in actual spending. This means local school boards are doing their job. However, because of varying declines in local pupil numbers, some districts' per pupil costs arithmetically increased. Per pupil costs are misleading since losing a couple of fifth graders doesn't make running your fifth grade class any less expensive, but since the state's convoluted funding formula rests heavily on per pupil costs, state funding to those districts decreased, necessitating an increase in local tax bills. In short, even where actual school costs went down, school taxes often went up.

Critics are quick to allow that education's "unsustainable" funding problems are nobody's fault. That's not necessarily true. If you were to find, for example, that a school's budget

rose due to extravagant staffing or ineffective programs, you could reasonably blame those responsible for the imprudent spending. On the other hand, if you find that a town's tax bill goes up even though its school's costs go down, maybe there's a problem with the funding formula.

Officials have announced their intention to revise the formula, which may make things better, or worse. But while they're working on that, they also say schools need to cut expenses. To accomplish this, state education leaders have a plan.

Many, if not most, teachers could provide an extensive list of unproductive programs and consultants, and redundant, untested assessments by which their schools waste money. These expenditures are commonly tied to state and federal mandates and that miraculous source of mystery funding called "grants," which we like to pretend don't cost anything, even though they come out of the same wallets that pay school taxes.

Policymakers rarely question any of these questionable expenses. Instead they've seized upon school consolidation as the means to saving money. They argue that small school districts duplicate administrative services, and that we could reduce those costs by combining districts under fewer superintendents.

Lurking behind that call for administrative restructuring is the reality that consolidation means not only the elimination of some local administrators, but also the elimination of many local schools. In towns with one school, a common occurrence in Vermont, this means losing your town school altogether.

Despite claims that consolidating schools into larger districts would save money, that's not how things usually work out. My reading suggests that consolidation eventually costs more, not less, but the best that proponents can reasonably argue is that it's fiscally neutral. For every economy of scale in hiring or purchasing, there are at least as many inefficiencies that come with greater distance from the classrooms and schools where actual education is delivered. As for reducing the number of administrators, the first thing most superintendents in larger districts do is hire assistant superintendents.

Proponents also argue that consolidation would better serve students and somehow better provide "education for the twenty-first century," a tagline experts and policymakers have been tacking on to justify dubious ideas since the 1980s.

This false assertion is more insidious and more dangerous. Its advocates tout the alleged benefits when schools adopt a "shared vision." They claim that consolidating power into larger districts they often hope to lead is "for the kids."

In practice that "shared vision" is whatever theory happens to be the current educational flavor of the month. It's most commonly "shared" by cramming it down the throats of local teachers, parents, and taxpayers. Policymakers rail against "one size fits all" education, but that's precisely what results from consolidated supervisory directives. As for the "kids," you can't know what's good for students unless you work with them. The problem with public education is that too many decisions are already made by people too far from and ignorant of what happens in a classroom. Consolidation would only exacerbate this pernicious flaw in the way we govern public schools.

Advocates ironically contend that districts need consolidation so they're better able to challenge federal "top-down mandates." Their condemnation of top-down mandates belies the fact that top-down is precisely what they intend to be as they absorb smaller districts into their "shared vision."

From one side of their mouths, experts sing the praises of consolidation. From the other they peddle remedies for the ills inherent in larger schools. It's at best illogical, and at worst rank hypocrisy, to simultaneously tout both "personalized learning" and bigger, less personal consolidated schools and districts.

Critics complain that governance by local boards is messy and inefficient, and sometimes it is. But Winston Churchill was

right. "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."

Those same state and national education officials also contend that local boards lack expertise. Yet those self-proclaimed experts are the ones, from *No Child Left Behind*, which they once endorsed as "best practice," to the surplus of bankrupt state initiatives they helped originate, including portfolio assessment, basic competencies, the public school approval process, our current teacher relicensing system, and the half-baked adoption of the Common Core, who have for decades demonstrated their stunning lack of expertise.

The nation's founders established American government at three levels. Each of us has little direct influence on our national leaders, but we accept that limitation because the federal government, while distant, is best suited to deal with issues like defense and foreign policy. At the statehouse we have a slightly enhanced opportunity to affect decisions. But our most direct control over public policy exists at the local level in our towns and cities. That's where parents and citizens can appeal directly to their local school boards.

Nothing belongs closer to home than control of our public schools. Exporting power over our schools to some governing body across the county or state will weaken our communities and deny parents a meaningful voice in their children's education.

Proponents claim that maintaining community schools is an outmoded, romanticized custom we can no longer afford. The truth is theirs is the costly fiction that ignores economic and education realities.

Make no mistake. Consolidating school districts won't save money. What it will do is further weaken schools by removing control of public education even farther from the classrooms where education happens.