

4/9/2014

To: Vermont House Ways and Means Committee

From: Bill Storz

As a parent, a teacher, and a school board member I am compelled to share my views of the current House Governance Bill (883) with you as you consider it. I have testified in House Education recently and my testimony there is linked below. As that testimony is lengthy, I will attempt to be very brief here.

Simply put, I believe that H. 883 is a severely flawed piece of legislation that drops a bomb into the machinery of Vermont education without any defined or even perceived benefit. There is no one who is not supportive of increasing opportunities for students. But this bill, in the name of student opportunities, "rearranges the chairs" without addressing or really even defining what student opportunities it is ostensibly discussing. One suspects that this bill, loaded with assumptions and vague platitudes, is a solution in search of a problem. Or worse, it is attempting to address certain narrow interests, while using "student opportunities" as a handy catch phrase to sell itself. This is wrong.

There is a clearly patronizing attitude in the bill which appears to hold places such as Chittenden County as the ideal, and language which implies that "small schools" and "children in some of our communities" as somehow missing out on the great big world of education. I believe in the 21st Century Skills ideals, but I do not think that rural areas and small schools are necessarily behind the curve with respect to them. There are many, many fine small schools in our neck of the woods. Reading between the lines of the bill one comes to the conclusion that all Vermont districts should model themselves after a successful large urban/suburban district, such as South Burlington. The authors apparently feel sorry for the rest of us. This is a misguided and ridiculous perspective, and the bill, to the large extent that it is apparently rooted in this perspective, misses the mark in a big way.

H 883 comes from a top-down managerial perspective, without recognizing grass roots level activity, whether from the teachers at the schools, or the citizens of the small towns. Their perspective is entirely missing. The bill appears to have been written by Superintendents and DOE people who obviously believe they have all the answers, and who do not appear to need to consult with the vast majority of the folks on the ground floors, on the front lines. It smacks of a narrow agenda. For any reform to be successful, in every way, the ground up perspective is absolutely vital. In the meantime, the top down marching orders have been given. I would urge the committee to reject the push to march, and to proceed with open eyes and ears, to listen to the voices of the students, parents and teachers in particular.

The myth that the issue of governance has not been looked at in over 100 years is absurd. It appears that it's been looked at non-stop for the past ten years, actually. And it hasn't changed much. Maybe there is a good reason for that. The state of education in Vermont is excellent. It could always improve. But let's not destroy what we have in pursuit of ill-defined goals, especially in the name of "student opportunities". That would be tragic, and ironic.

This legislation prescribes research as part of what it sets in motion. In my opinion the research should come first, beginning with answering the question: "Where have governmental changes, such as we suggest, been proven effective over time to achieve the goals that we are aiming for (student opportunities, fiscal benefits)?" Why would we set in motion, by passing this legislation, anything that would have such a huge impact on our children, our students, without knowing first that this is a tried and true approach, not simply what might appear to be a good idea. There is a great deal of distance between what might make sense with respect to educational practice and what actually does work!

I would urge the committee to reject this bill as it stands now, and instead consider more clearly: What are the goals we are trying to achieve? And what are the best ways to get there? There are some challenges in Vermont education, particularly fiscal and also with respect to leadership. There are some ways that administrative functions, such as business offices can share resources and combine to save money, for example. It is important and admirable to address these huge issues, but I feel that H 883 ultimately would do a great deal more harm than good to the rich, diverse complex and largely successful educational environment in Vermont. Please review the variety of testimony in House Education on this bill (including mine on 3/18) at this link:

<http://www2.leg.state.vt.us/legdir/committeeinfo.cfm?CommitteeID=191&Folder=House Education/Bills&Sort=Bill>

Thanks for listening!

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