

TO: Honorable House Ways and Means Committee Members
RE: H 883 School Governance Legislation
FROM: Conrad W Smith
DATE: April 9, 2014

Conrad Smith
4/9/14

I have been the moderator of the Calais School Meeting, a member of the U-32 High School Board and was, until this month, the Chair of the Washington Central Supervisory Union – although I speak here for only myself and not any of those organizations.

I hope you do not approve the consolidation proposals in H 883 because:

- First, if I were to ask each of you, “Where are you from?” nearly all would answer with the name of a town or city. Like it or not, Vermonters are deeply imprinted with a very local sense of ‘community’. For our schools, I believe this is a good thing. We are fortunate to have a thousand and more dedicated volunteers on our school boards and thousands more involved in and concerned with their local schools.

Trying to force people’s sense of ‘school community’ into larger districts will diminish 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. Advisory Councils, as you know, are not the same as Boards.

- Second, this is a time of excitement and challenge for our schools to do more and to do better for all Vermont’s students. Administrators, school board members, parents and concerned citizens have a great deal to do over the next several years. We do not need distraction, angst and effort over deciding on new Education Districts. Which Towns to include? What to do with that town? How to apportion Board membership? How to apportion debt? What By-Laws to enact?

There is only so much time and effort available. Enacting this governance legislation and requiring us all to spend much time and effort deciding on issues regarding forced consolidation will necessarily take away from educating our kids.

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

Equalizing educational opportunity is an often claimed benefit of consolidation -- and surely that is possible.-- but we also know of the vast opportunities available from digital technology which may bring as much varied opportunity to our schools as consolidation.

Some kids now ride buses an hour in WCSU and elsewhere. Small schools will likely close if H. 883 is passed. Such closures mean longer bus rides. Kids whose families don’t have reliable vehicles, or can’t rearrange their schedules, to transport their kids will miss school more often -- and they may well be the kids most in need of getting to school regularly.

There is very little evidence that consolidation will save money – even less evidence of more savings than could occur under the current system with changes you have recently enacted

- Finally, those recent laws changed the power of local boards, their relationship to Supervisory Unions and the provision of many services. We have been working on adopting those changes in cost efficient and educationally sound ways. Please give us time to work through those changes before deciding they are not working and giving us new tasks.