

Testimony to House Ways and Means Committee regarding H.883

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By Mark Bushnell

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Vermont is the envy of the nation in many ways, not least of which for our tight communities, sense of place and ability to collectively create solutions to problems that have vexed other states. These are among our state's greatest strengths. The Legislature is now considering a bill that would devastate these strengths that have served the state so well.

House Bill 883 is a reckless bit of legislation. In trying to improve our relatively strong public school system, the bill would have Vermont forfeit one of our greatest assets by dismantling our local democratic system and greatly weakening our sense of community.

Children do best when parents and community members, the people who really know them, are involved in their schools. The easy access parents and other town residents have to local school board members is an essential factor in the excellent quality of life we enjoy in Vermont. Replacing local school boards with a far-off regional board and a local advisory committee with no power would alienate the community from the school.

As legislators, you might not understand or at least remember viscerally the pain of powerlessness that comes when decisions are made from afar. Vermonters have always benefited from a local governance system where, in most communities, we live in a world of about two degrees of separation. If we have a question or an issue about the school, we know a school board member, or a school board member is at least a friend of a friend.

The new system proposed in House Bill 883 would add multiple degrees of separation between voters and their representative on this regional board. We'll be lucky if we know our community's representative. Even if we do, we will know that people from other communities will comprise the majority of the board and will be the ones making decisions about our local school. If you want a recipe for making people feel disenfranchised and disconnected from their local schools, this is it.

Empowered local school boards understand local dynamics, where regional boards often don't have the time or ability to see the nuances of a situation and can easily create policies and make decisions that are tone deaf to local realities. I've seen this firsthand as a school board member, when we have been able to craft a policy differently from how the board at our union high school had, and thus avoid creating a schism in our community.

I rarely take public positions on political questions. In fact, I never have before. But I would feel derelict in my duty as a citizen, school board member and father, if I don't say we need to preserve an intact local democratic infrastructure. Frankly, I'm a little surprised it even needs saying.

How much is our sense of community worth? Is there something we would trade it for? I'm thinking few Vermonters would surrender it for the vague promises of improved

administration efficiencies and educational opportunity. To say that we have to give up one to get the other is a false dichotomy.

Vermonters are more creative than that. If the Vermont Legislature rejects the top-down approach this bill takes and instead initiates a nonpartisan, non-agenda-driven, statewide discussion of what Vermonters really want from their education system, I am confident that together we will come up with a better answer—one that is more creative and more effective, and doesn't gut our sense of community in the process.

Thank you.