

Susan Clark
Testimony to House Ways and Means Committee
H. 883: Education Governance Structure
April 9, 2014

•*Author:*

Susan Clark and Woden Teachout, Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home (Chelsea Green, 2012)

Susan Clark and Frank Bryan, All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community (Ravenmark Publishing, 2005).

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Thank you for inviting public comment on this important issue.

Below is my two-minute testimony outlining my concerns about H. 883.

In addition, I am attaching two commentaries that detail my concerns more specifically.

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I'm a professional facilitator, working with Vermont communities for 25 years. I have co-authored two books on local democracy. And I've served as Town Moderator for 10 years.

We've heard a lot about the intended goals of H. 883. What I am concerned about is the unintended consequences.

Vermont's Unique Strengths

Vermont is currently among the richest in "social capital" in America: our communities are solution-oriented, high in volunteerism, and tolerant of differences. Social science research suggests that our local governance structures, like town and school meetings and empowered school boards, may be why.

Other states are desperate for what we take for granted.

The unseen benefits of our citizen engagement might surprise you. Three examples:

• **1: Economic strength:** Researchers have found a correlation between citizen engagement and community resilience against unemployment.

• **2: Responsiveness in crisis:** During Irene, we saw the outpouring of volunteers, readily mobilized by experienced citizen-leaders. One of the lowest-cost ways to prepare for crises is to strengthen community engagement.

• **3: Deep bench:** One-third of Vermont legislators served first in local office. And school issues are an especially important starting place for women. In order to encourage citizens to rise into leadership, the ladder has to have bottom rungs. Whether you're a Democrat or Republican, remember: school boards are your farm team.

So What Should We Do?

It's time to change the conversation.

I would strongly urge the legislature to hire a neutral convener and lead Vermonters in a systematic, statewide conversation to help identify and embrace our common goals.

As long we pit good schools against sustainable taxes, or administrative efficiency against local democracy, we'll stay stuck.

It's time to engage all Vermonters in finding creative, regionally diverse solutions that support a common vision.

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VERMONT PUBLIC RADIO COMMENTARY - SUSAN CLARK

(Scheduled to air 4/10/2014)

The Vermont legislature is considering a bill that would replace Vermont's local school boards with larger, consolidated, regional control. The potential for either educational benefits or cost savings is hotly debated. But one thing is clear from public reaction: if passed, it would create polarization and push-back for years to come.

If we're serious about making systemic change in Vermont education, mandates aren't the answer. What we need is an authentic, heart-to-heart conversation.

By way of comparison, let's consider the path of another critical Vermont issue: agriculture.

Back in the day, Vermont farms were farms. There wasn't a lot more to the discussion.

But by the 1970s, farms were disappearing. Some said, "You can't fight progress. You can't have both rural values and modern economic success."

Others didn't accept that trade-off.

Through land trusts, Vermonters began protecting farm *land*. But supporters soon realized they had to go beyond this, and protect “farming” – meaning the community systems that support agriculture.

We needed to change the conversation. And we did. Over time, statewide conferences and facilitated community discussions revealed surprising truths. Maybe farmers thought they were producing milk and apples. But as we talked about it, Vermonters realized that farms mean much more to us.

- Farms are critical to Vermont tourism.
- Farms are important to Vermonters’ health, because fresh produce is key to good nutrition.
- Farming’s neighborly cooperation dramatically shapes both our economy and our communities.
- And Vermonters breathe in the *beauty* of farms – they’re woven into our art, history -- even poetry.

Vermonters can now articulate a consensus: farms aren’t just farms. Our working rural land is part of all of us – and we want to invest in it.

Never underestimate the power of a common vision. It opens the doors to previously inconceivable collaborations. From urban composting, to portable slaughter facilities, to the innovative “Farm to Plate” network that allows Vermonters on food assistance to shop at farmers’ markets — we’ve created a web of synergistic solutions.

It’s time to do the same thing for education. Some legislative leaders are proposing a statewide public dialogue, so we can change the conversation.

As long we believe the choice is between good schools and sustainable taxes, or between administrative efficiency and local democracy, we’ll stay stuck. What we need is mutual respect, more listening, and a commitment to finding common ground. And we need to involve everyone – experts, certainly, but also average citizens. They’re not called “public” schools for nothing.

A good public conversation takes time, and a neutral, non-partisan convener. It starts with questions, not answers. If the questions are framed carefully, it allows for complexity and regional diversity. And it’s accountable, with actions based on findings.

We must surround our education issues with the creative, solution-oriented thinking of Vermonters as a whole. If we build a common vision, we can create lasting solutions.

The changes we need will be made more quickly -- if only we can find the courage to slow down and listen.

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RUTLAND HERALD AND TIMES ARGUS OP-ED - SUSAN CLARK
March 16, 2014

School governance: cut bureaucracy, not democracy

The House Education Committee is proposing legislation that would dramatically limit citizens' voices in decision making, now and in the future.

While claims of cost savings or educational benefits have yet to be convincing, the proposal has unintended consequences that could touch every element of Vermont life. In fact, it could do more than any in recent history to jeopardize Vermont democracy.

The proposal would do away with local school boards. In their place, each town would send one representative to a regional board that would oversee multiple schools. Town Meeting Day school deliberations would be replaced by a single ballot on a monolithic budget. New "citizen advisory panels" would have no decision-making power.

Would it be less democratic? Absolutely. Schools are at the heart of Vermont's communities. And slowly but inexorably, citizens' perception of school governance would go from being a "we" to a "they."

Vt.'s Unique Strengths

Vermont is currently among the richest in "social capital" in America: our communities are solution-oriented, high in volunteerism, and tolerant of differences.

Local governance, including our school and town meetings, may be the reason. We know, for instance, that five of the six New England states, the only places in America where town meetings are practiced, rank in the top ten for civil society. Vermont often ranks first.

The House committee's proposal is based on bigger-is-better, hierarchical thinking. This outdated model silences the complexity of voices, and proposes consolidation and one-size-fits-all solutions — a holdover from the Industrial Revolution.

But today's voters are veterans of the Open-Source Revolution. Gone are the days of top-down control; welcome to networked citizens with extraordinary online research and organizing abilities. Governments now need to treat citizens as collaborative equals, working less like a hierarchy and more like a wiki. Reliance on "experts" is giving way to decentralized, bottom-up strategies that reward innovation and information sharing.

This puts Vermont ahead of the curve. In fact, Vermont's traditional decision-making is a model for rebuilding civic institutions. In New York City, Chicago and California, new "Participatory Budgeting" systems hand decision-making power directly to citizens in local wards and districts. Strikingly similar to our town and school meetings, participatory budgeting has swept the globe and is deemed a "good governance practice"

by the UN. Its small-scale power-sharing model is designed to awaken precisely the kind of engagement we take for granted in Vermont.

Our vibrant community fabric is Vermont's strongest asset. Vermont is uniquely poised: We can offer globally networked learning while celebrating a vibrant sense of place. We can provide our students with both roots and wings.

What would we lose?

New studies find additional surprising dividends to citizen-powered decision making.

Economic strength: Many researchers have noticed a link between citizen involvement and local economies. For instance, a 2011 National Conference on Citizenship report showed a correlation between citizen engagement and community resilience against unemployment.

Responsiveness in crisis: Engaged communities are more effective in emergencies. When a community's physical infrastructure is swept away (like with Irene and Sandy) it reveals another layer of community — its civic infrastructure. In Vermont during Irene, civic infrastructure meant an outpouring of volunteers, readily mobilized by experienced citizen-leaders. One of the lowest-cost ways to prepare for crises — whether meteorological, social, or political — is to strengthen community engagement.

Citizen responsibility: Direct, deliberative democracy can change us personally. Research on juries shows that empowered deliberation measurably increases voting rates. And more: it often increases volunteerism; it inspires many to follow the news; it can strengthen our sense of community and respect; and it can improve our receptivity to new information, allowing new solutions to emerge.

Deep bench: One-third of the Vermont legislature has served in local office. Here's where we learn agenda setting, listening, and compromise — in other words, leadership. Whether Democrat or Republican, legislators take note: school boards are not your enemy. They are your farm team.

So what should we do?

Another coalition of legislators proposes engaging Vermont citizens in assessing their educational values and priorities. Burlington's may look different from the Northeast Kingdom's, but that's okay. Think creativity, not uniformity; networks, not hierarchy. New webs can improve equity, accountability, and resource sharing, while maintaining local power to find and implement local solutions.

From the Statehouse, local decision-making may look messy. But given the Internet and Millennial generation thinking, this is the reality of a well-informed, engaged electorate.

Today's citizens may appear less governable. But: they're much better at self-governance. The job in Montpelier, then, is to create systems to let them do it.