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Editorial: Consolidation

By Emerson Lynn

If nothing is done, Vermont lawmakers will approve a seven-cent increase in the statewide property tax rate, which would be the largest increase ever imposed to fund our schools.

That's not likely. The governor has promised the increase would be less. The House Ways and Means Committee has already proposed a plan that would cut the increase to five cents.

The message from Town Meeting Day was clear to legislators: There is a limit to what Vermonters can afford and that limit has been reached. There is a palpable concern in the statehouse that voters consider present cost trends unsustainable and for legislators to pretend otherwise is as foolhardy as it is insensitive.

The worry, however, is that legislators will act in the moment and not with the foresight necessary to ensure a sustainable, high-quality educational system. The worry is that legislators will be seduced more by immediate cost-cutting measures and forego proposed systemic changes that would set the long term stage for lower costs and improved outcomes.

It's not an either-or-proposition. Both could, and should be done.

On the property tax front, the Legislature will consider, among other things, reducing the small school grants, saving a couple of million dollars. It will also consider increasing the penalties for districts that spend at a rate higher than inflation. It will examine the need to change the income sensitivity program so households earning between \$47,000 and \$90,000, would pay more. It may also consider modifying the calculations that determine a school district's spending per equalized pupil.

Whatever the choices, the outcome will be something that reduces the seven cent increase in the statewide property tax, and it will be something that puts some downward pressure on school spending.

That's helpful, but that's largely an exercise in rearranging what we already have.

There are opportunities that hold more promise.

Our representatives also should give serious consideration to the proposed school consolidation legislation being considered, which would organize education around regional preK-12 districts, thus reducing the number of school districts and supervisory unions.

Of the two, consolidation is the heavier lift. Cutting taxes makes the headlines in a positive way; at least politically. Reorganizing our schools boards and supervisory unions creates headlines in a more controversial way.

But it's the long-term reorganizational effort that provides the framework necessary to change how our schools function, how they can be better managed, how costs can be controlled and how outcomes can be improved.

If all the Legislature does is to cut a grant or two, or impose penalties on high spending schools, it has not dealt with the systemic issues that contribute to the problem we have. That's kicking the proverbial can down the road.

Think about it. We have 282 school districts and 80 supervisory unions. We have roughly 1,500 school board members for about 80,000 students, or one school board member for every 53 students. No other state has an administrative structure even close to what we have in Vermont. We could cut what we have in place by half, and still be far below the national average.

The consolidation proposal being considered is supported, in large part, by the school board association and the superintendents' association, the two groups best acquainted with the need.

But it's being pilloried in commentary as being "a body blow to local democracy", the tired suggestion that what we had in 1912 is still relevant today, that nothing should change despite the fact we've lost 30,000 students over the last 15 years and that many of our towns are losing population.

Critics contend consolidation would not save money and that it would, in the process, threaten the relationship between teachers and their students.

Please.

The critics are largely apologists for the system we have and offer no thoughts as to how things might be changed for the better, or how our educational system must evolve if it is to stay relevant. If the public approves the school budget, then, they argue, the need to change must not exist. End of discussion.

That's precisely the line of argument that stultifies innovation.

Why is it that every other discipline must undergo constant change to remain relevant, but in Vermont we think it prudent to defend a school governance system that's over a century old? The school consolidation argument is not about saving paper clips. It's about making coordinated decisions more efficiently. It's about using our resources more effectively. It's about giving teachers a higher, more meaningful level of support. It's about improving the level of communication between schools and the public.

These virtues are almost impossible to realize with our current system. We have too many trying to manage too few. That creates a balkanized system which forfeits control to the smallest unit, making it almost impossible to move the system, as a whole, ahead.

We spend enough money on our schools. For that, we should be thankful. It's time now to act on proposals that will help us spend that money more wisely, and with better results.

The school consolidation proposal is a start.