

## Smalls schools and Opportunities for Learning

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H.883, a bill to consolidate Vermont's smaller schools and school districts was recently voted out of the House Education Committee. The bill is being fast-tracked by its advocates without close study and reflection for a vote by the Vermont House of Representatives in the next coming weeks. If passed, 282 local districts would be eliminated and replaced by some 50 or so "extended districts". H.883 would harm Vermont schools for many reasons. Here are two:

### Moving to 'big':

There are countless education studies that address the success of small schools. Perhaps, some Vermont schools are too small but all of the research agrees schools of 150 – 500 students are just right (depending on whether the school is preK-12, elementary, middle or high school). Smaller schools have higher graduation rates, less risky behaviors and soften the harshness of poverty.

It is indeed ironic that all over the nation, educational systems are looking for ways to decrease the size of their schools and classes as a pathway to success for their students. They are trying to be more like Vermont. Just four or five years ago the Maine legislature passed a bill similar to H.883. For multiple reasons, a few short years later, Maine is backtracking and separating those larger recently formed super-supervisory unions. Moving to big just doesn't work. The passage of H.883 would be a waste of time and taxpayer money.

### Loss of local voice:

H.883 would eliminate local school boards. This concept is not only anti-Vermont in nature it is illogical. Vermonters take pride in local and small. Access to decision makers and local community involvement is what makes Vermont successfully tick and our schools succeed. Other states envy our 'local-ness' -- our ability to speak with neighbors in decision-making positions who are indeed accountable to us. I may not always agree with my local school board members but they know me. We exercise together, shop at the same stores and debate each other at town meeting. We have mutual respect for each other. Eliminating local school boards would lessen parents' ability to affect decisions regarding their children's education. It would also lessen the voice of knowledgeable educators who are known by their local boards.

H.883's express rationale for improving education is unsubstantiated; its calls for efficiency are non-existent. There is an "absence of evidence that governance change translates, without a whole lot more, into expanded opportunities to learn. I certainly understand the logic, but I believe the experience in other locales would lead to the conclusion that learning opportunities generally decline for kids from outlying communities, small communities, low wealth communities. ...This proposal provides, as yet, nothing convincing that it will lead to expanded opportunities." Joel Cook, VT-NEA Executive Director.

Over the years there have been many initiatives to consolidate schools in Vermont. All have failed because they failed to take local concerns and opinions into account. Certainly, there may be school districts that could benefit by merging with another district or school. Instead of enacting a one-size-fits-all mandate, the legislature should strengthen ways to make all schools work for all students by giving schools and districts incentives and encouragement to do what is best for our clientele – the students.

Even if one believes consolidating school districts is a good idea, the timing of H.883 is poor. With great and promising hope, last year the Vermont legislature passed Act 77 that provides flexible pathways to graduation, personalized learning plans for all students and proficiency-based graduation requirements. Act 77 is a wonderful, visionary law but requires massive systemic efforts and some paradigm shifts by major stakeholders – particularly parents, communities and students. Thankfully, many Vermont educators and administrators are beginning to understand and embrace the Act. However, the success of Act 77 means additional work on the part of schools to educate stakeholders about its provisions. To lay another major systemic change (H.883 – school consolidation) on an overloaded system is extremely concerning. With Act 77, Vermont schools were given the

start towards real expansion of student opportunities and educational reform. H.883's imposition of top-down organizational strategy is antithetical to Act 77. H.883 demonstrates the kind of old school thinking that mires and binds educational reform and uplifting visions like Act 77.