

The stated objectives of this bill are to expand opportunities for students, align education delivery PK-12 and deliver education more cost effectively. I ask that you please define our problems clearly and design rather than mandate a solution after existing barriers are properly understood.

As a School Board Chair in an SU with strong leadership and excellent transparency, I can say with certainty that there is little variance in opportunity across our schools despite our numerous community boards. What is different reflects the different preferences and values of each community. We know exactly what is different across our schools because we study them down to the hours spent on each subject, core and elective, at each school. Armed with this data we can understand any differences in outcomes and make informed choices about changing our investments.

We prioritize aligning PK-12, because we see our students as part of a larger community and system. What parent doesn't take the long view? We are efficient, contracting and purchasing collaboratively. We share resources whenever possible, to recruit and retain the best talent- it would be impossible to hire them otherwise.

Our roles are well defined. Administrators are instructional and community leaders, who manage staff and support students and families. Boards provide governance for investments and operations to ensure we abide by law and policies, maximize our academic return for our investment and optimally serve our students and community. The supervisory union central office manages accounting, including payroll, conflict resolution and legal affairs, policy, licensing, contract negotiations and HR, special education, curriculum management, and reporting required by the state and federal government.

I am aware that some SUs do not function as we do. I am also aware that the AOE has not been providing any performance guidelines or expectations to operate as we do. The reports we find crucial to guiding choices around opportunity and efficiency are not asked for by the AOE and not offered to SUs.

Given this bill's plan to force massive statewide consolidation, as a collection of communities that are delivering excellent outcomes cost effectively, we have to reflect then on what exactly are the barriers to PK-12 alignment and do they justify eliminating local elected oversight of schools and budgets by 80-90%?

In the context of the current reality, I see three critical barriers to achieving the stated goals of increasing student opportunities and efficiency:

Absence of Leadership: The AOE currently engages with SUs by requiring inputs for licensing, compliance, reimbursements and our tax formula and providing details around mandates and tax rates. The AOE has no prescription for what an effective central office is, what it needs or how it operates. It has not provided any guidance on these matters and demonstrates no operational expertise to do so.

As we aspire to reduce costs, we must note that the Agency of Education employs 155 people and its FY 2014 budget is \$24 million dollars, equal to over \$400,000 for each of our current SUs and SDs. Their spending is up 10% from FY 2013 and the budget slated for FY 2015 is up another 9%. H.883 calls for still more resources for the AOE to oversee the consolidation work, and that isn't counted in the AOE estimates of \$11 million in costs of the consolidation itself. I fail to see how slathering on money at the top of the pile, burning money in reorganizing administration and reducing resources and control closer to schools and children is constructive to achieving our stated goals.

The Agency needs to be refined and refocused on the strategic work to facilitate the change our schools need in partnership with communities.

Absence of Accountability: Substantially equal educational opportunity and operational efficiency aren't measured by the state. There is no quality standard or threshold. There is no roadmap for improving or support to facilitate improvement outside of extremely high special education spending. There are no consequences for failure to provide substantially equal education opportunity. This means that the state doles out money without any regard for delivering quality education or doing so at reasonable expense. When we switched from local funding to statewide funding, some accountability should have been associated with that funding. We are nearing on 20 years later and still there is none. Accountability and funding must be related if we want to improve quality and efficiency.

The AOE has tracked no longitudinal performance data to help us understand the correlations between spending and performance and evaluate statewide academic return on investment. This needs to be developed to guide investments, consolidations and other reforms.

Substantially Unequal Access to Funds: When total resources per student available to some districts is over \$30,000 and for others is only \$10,000 you will, inevitably, have substantially unequal access to education opportunities. This IS the reality in VT and the ill-tracked flow of tuition student dollars does not erase the reality of these enormous inequities that the state seems determined not to measure and to ignore. Inequities in opportunity are the inevitable result of Act 68, which funnels resources to certain communities through selectively discounted spending and away from others that aren't similarly protected. The legislature is the key obstacle to progress on this front, though it is unclear to me why given the impact we can see it having on our state.

These three most central obstacles to achieving our goals do not in any way justify undermining effective boards elected by their communities. They do not require sweeping consolidation. There is ample evidence that there is insufficient clarity and competency to guide constructive consolidation within a single SU, let alone to consolidate them all at once. Focus should be placed on the three reasons for our subpar performance: deficits in leadership, accountability and equitable funding.

Last week Speaker Shap Smith criticized Rep Heidi Sheuermann's proposed amendment to Repeal and Replace Act 68 on the basis that it lacked clarity about a replacement system. While his comments drip with irony in the context of the single payer legislation, the same criticism can and should be levied here. I call upon our legislators to do the responsible thing and place the horse before the cart.

Large-scale elimination of local, elected governance is not the solution to the problems we face. This is not what Vermonters want, and it is not what our students and taxpayers need.