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Rethinking Local Control in Education - by Jay Nichols

I've always considered myself a state's rights supporter. As such, I believe greatly in local control. In fact, in March 2010, I testified against a bill that would consolidate Supervisory Unions but did nothing to improve the fundamental problems with our governance system.

However, in the recent controversy in the legislature about ending our current multi-layered and unnecessarily bureaucratic Supervisory Union governance structure in public education, it has become apparent to me that we Vermonters need to really rethink the concept of 'local control'. The proposed legislation would replace Supervisory Unions with bigger school districts (at least 1250 students and/or the combining of at least four current districts). Consolidating the Districts in current Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford) as an example, would not necessitate the closing of any of our schools. I believe it would provide for better educational opportunities for students and families, easier sharing of resources, better fiscal stability and sustainability for local taxpayers, and perhaps cost savings over the long term.

To be frank, I believe we currently have too many school districts, too many school board members, too many superintendents, too many teachers, and too few students to continue to operate with a school governance system invented before Teddy Roosevelt's presidency.

I can't think of any student-centered reason to keep the current system. Again, using our own local school districts as an example, here are some advantages we would realize as a single district. I could list many more:

- One budget across multiple schools and towns provides for more stable tax rates for residents. In our current system, if a couple of high needs (and thus costly) students move into a town, it can immediately throw a budget into crisis. Spreading special education costs across multiple schools limits the peaks and valleys that occur with a highly mobile student population.
- With one district, we don't have the same level of tuition concerns we deal with now. Currently, in a small elementary school if you have a big 8th grade going to high schools and many fewer seniors graduating from high schools, you immediately have a huge budget problem. One in which you have no control at all. With one district with school choice for high school students to go wherever they want, you immediately stabilize the predictability of budget development and you actually have some control over that part of your spending.
- Currently, we have many students that go to schools that are 30 or more minutes away from their home because of where they 'legally

reside,' when there is another school within five to 10 minutes away from their home. In one case, students must ride through two additional Districts to get to their "local" school. As one school district, parents could send students to any of our elementary schools provided there was adequate room in the class. This would save on transportation, time for students on busses, and provide greater parent convenience.

- Sharing staffing would be a huge advantage across the state. We could provide much more equity for students. For example, in our local high schools, we have one high school that has three times as many advanced placement courses as the other. We don't share teachers between the two schools because they are two separate districts, thus two separate employers with separate employees. Each has a Union that has legal right to the work of teaching in that school district. If we were one district, especially with the digital technology we have today, we could have one teacher teaching AP classes to students in the two high schools at the same time and there would be one single Union to work with. This is true for many other classes as well.

As school board members can attest, true local control has been eroding over the last few decades. School systems, and their budgets, are often beholden to contractual obligations, state mandates and federal law. None of which are focused on improving student learning and opportunities.

It is time we rethink what we mean by local control. Maybe local doesn't have to be microscopic. I live in Berkshire. I do my grocery shopping at the Hannaford's in Enosburg. I know a lot of people in Bakersfield, Montgomery, and Richford who do the same. If we followed the logic of local control for each town, as we do for public education, I would not be able to shop at Hannaford's - only residents of Enosburg would. How does that make any sense at all? Yet, this is exactly what we do with our school systems in Vermont.

Defenders of the status quo do not support changing our governance system. I understand the concerns they have but believe any concerns can be addressed. It is my hope that when decisions are finally made on this issue, students will be in the forefront. As a Superintendent, if this bill becomes law, it is possible I could be out of a job. Nevertheless, there is no question in my mind that combining small school districts into bigger, single school districts provides students with much more opportunities educationally and provides for a more sustainable educational delivery system for Vermont.