

Robert Stevens  
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As a lifelong educator with experience as a teacher, principal and executive director of the Vermont Principals' Association, I closely watch policy issues that will affect the quality and affordability of public education.

In my view, H.883 – which would create an education system of Pre-K to Grade 12 school districts in Vermont, is finally confronting an area of work that educational leaders and our communities have found to be inefficient and confusing for many years. The fear of losing “local control” should not be the factor that impedes our ability to restructure our delivery system to meet the needs of our current society, and more importantly our students. Like any other piece of important legislation, there are always pros and cons but as a native Vermonter I support this bill because there are far more potential gains than there are factual concerns.

It is about time that we have a model that is not about rearranging the deck chairs, but rather about equipping the ship with a better navigational system. The once well-intentioned design of our archaic supervisory union structure is crushing our ability to make the sustained long-term changes we need to make to keep up with 21st century challenges. In many ways, H.883 not only creates a more effective, efficient organizational structure but it clearly opens the pathway to increased focus on those decisions which have the greatest impact on the lives of students.

Granted, a change from our antiquated system of supervisory unions does not guarantee better anything. But it gives us a fighting chance. Today, we have supervisory unions with as many as 16 school boards and serving as few as 350 children. The supervisory union structure, a relic of a bygone era, no longer has currency in a period of global societal needs, rapidly advancing technology and a call for the best education system possible. We can not afford to admire what we have without being willing to make changes that will help move us to where we need to go.

Critics of H.883 should acknowledge that while it calls for the elimination of supervisory unions, it provides an abundance of opportunity for local voice in all matters related to the new system. To those people who have felt that public schools have changed little in the last 50 years, this bill demonstrates a serious effort to tackle problematic areas that have, heretofore, been off limits.

Opponents of the bill say that the goals of the legislation are vague and poorly articulated. As a life-long Vermont educator serving the children and communities of this state, I say that the benefits are clear. They include:

- A unified vision and delivery system, with a more cohesive approach to professional development, curriculum, and programming. This will ensure students moving through the PreK-12 continuum have equal access to high quality instruction informed by best practice.
- More equitable use of resources to serve all children, so that the programs available to them are not limited by the boundaries of their town.

- Increased educational offerings within schools and within school districts. Families will see more options for students to access programs that meet their unique learning needs.
- Greater capacity to support the district school board in its critical role governing the school system. The board will have better access to data, more reliable information and support from administrators, and direct lines of accountability through which to evaluate the success of the schools and their students.
- Reduced costs for fiscal monitoring and overall business operations as well as reduced time and costs associated with state and federal reporting.
- Increased ability to more responsibly employ and retain teachers. In our current system of micro-districts, a budget cut often means a teacher is laid off. This makes responsible budgeting challenging and supporting teachers even more so. In a larger district options for retaining teachers by adjusting placements are much greater.
- Better facilities management resulting in healthier school environments and greater protection of public investments. Small districts struggle to keep their buildings up; in tight budget times, preventive maintenance is often the first cut made.
- More ability to recruit and retain high quality leaders. There is no question that Pre-K to Grade 12 districts are a more attractive system to well-qualified educational leaders.
- Mitigate volatility in tax rates. A unified system would have one tax rate instead of a separate tax rate for each member school district. This would simplify how homestead rates are calculated and make it easier for community members to understand.

In summary, I honestly believe, based on my years of experience and observation, that a Pre-K to Grade 12 system is a far better way to serve taxpayers, communities, and most importantly, our children.

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