

JASON P. MORRISSEY

P.O. BOX 26 • NORTH BENNINGTON, VT 05257

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COPY

Dear Bennington Banner:

I am asking that you publish the enclosed letter either as a letter to the Editor or as a guest column in either the Saturday (10/20) or Monday (10/23) editions of the Bennington Banner.

Many thanks,

JASON MORRISSEY

October 19, 2012

Letter to the Editor (Bennington Banner)

“An Alternate Viewpoint on the North Bennington School”

With all that has been said and written about the possibility of the North Bennington Graded School being closed and reopened as a private academy, I write this letter from the viewpoint of a North Bennington resident and taxpayer who feels it is in the best interest of North Bennington to continue to operate a high-performing elementary school, regardless of whether or not the school remains a public school or is transformed in to a private academy.

It is from that viewpoint that I will vote “NO” to both ballot articles on October 23, 2012 and therefore vote to keep the public school open.

There can be no debate that the individuals who have constituted the ISIS Committee, the North Bennington Prudential Board, and the individuals who now comprise the Village School of North Bennington Board of Trustees have put considerable time and effort into their efforts to create an independent private school in North Bennington. What can easily be debated is their justification to close the North Bennington Graded School.

The process to create the independent academy began nearly two years ago. While it is certainly true that many public meetings have been held since then, it is also true that many (most?) were attended by very few members of the public (I note one set of meeting minutes posted on the NBSGS website stated the previous meeting had been “well attended” – with 12 members of the public present). Many in North Bennington, including myself, received little notice of the committee meetings, or received notice for meetings that had already occurred days before. Early in the process of the consideration by the ISIS committee to create a private academy, I will admit to indifference as to whether the North Bennington Graded School continued to operate as a public school or was “re-created” as a private school. My wife and I had long ago made the decision that Sacred Heart School in Bennington was the best choice for our daughter for her K-8 education and my assumption was that I would continue to vote in North Bennington on a school board and budget for the school regardless of how it continued to operate in the future (as a public school or private academy).

As I learned more about the deliberations being made by the committee, it became evident to me that the view of the committee was clear – shut down the North Bennington Graded School as it now exists, at any cost, and open a private academy under their exclusive management. What also became clear to me was the general public in North Bennington was to lose most (nearly all) of the local control of their school if this were to happen.

Earlier this year, in March, North Bennington voters were asked to consider closing the public school and reopening it as a private school. Having not attended the “community meetings” held by the committees involved (and noting here for the public that, at least in my

opinion, they were NOT as well advertised as the proponents of the private school have stated in recent letters to the editor, guest columns, and meetings) I took it upon myself, in the days ahead of the March election to have a telephone conversation with an individual who served on the ISIS committee and has since be selected (but not by voters) to be a trustee of the proposed private school.

The primary purpose of this conversation was: (a) to get a better understanding on the proposed budget of the private school, and (b) learn how trustees for the school would be selected.

What I was told in that conversation was the following:

1. The budget is not public information and would not be disclosed. I was also told in that conversation the tax savings would be substantial to the taxpayers but the budget was not being disclosed publicly for two reasons: taxpayers would not understand the savings, and taxpayers would expect the same savings every year.
2. Voters would cease to vote on the managing board of the school – the new Board of Trustees (self-elected themselves) would self-select future Trustees. The public election of board members would cease immediately upon the creation of the private academy.
3. Although the private academy will be funded with largely public funds, there will be no open meeting requirement for the private academy going forward, thus eliminating the public's ability to attend and participate in school board meetings.

Although not stated directly, there was also the indication that committee members felt the North Bennington Graded School would ultimately be closed involuntarily and the creation of private school was necessary to avoid closure of the current school.

I was disappointed by these responses. I felt they were both eliteist (disenfranchising voters in North Bennington from public election of the "school board" AND claiming that voters would not understand the budget) and misleading (the only group that has the power to close the current school are the registered voters in North Bennington – not the Southwestern Vermont Supervisory Union, not the Vermont State Board of Education, and not any other outside agency).

Since that time I have followed this matter more closely, examined the documents on the North Bennington Graded School website, and attended the last "public information session" on this matter (last week).

Here is what I have observed over the last several months:

1. The budget for the private school has no demonstrable savings to the taxpayer compared to the public school.
2. At the last "information session" it was estimated (by the Prudential Board and the Trustees) in the first year of operation the private school would, in fact, only lower the tax rate to North Bennington taxpayers "one penny" (translation: for a taxpayer who owns a \$150,000.00 home in North Bennington, the tax on that property would decrease a whopping \$15 next year).
3. There will no longer be public oversight as to the operation of the school. Voters will not select trustees and voters will not be able to vote on budgets. Voters will be able to vote on a "per pupil tuition rate" only— but will not have access to information regarding the overall budget, how it is spent, or what other outside funds have been made available (if any) to the private school.
4. At the last public information session (10/11/12) the public was told, by Darren Houck, Head of School at The Mountain School in Winhall and co-chair of the Board of Trustees for the proposed private academy, all of the above actually meant more public control for the voters (how?.....we no longer will have a vote on the management or budget of the school and there is no open meeting requirement for a private school - meaning voters and taxpayers are precluded from attending Trustee's meetings). Houck also informed the public that it was his opinion it will be better for the Trustees NOT to be elected by the public because now they would only need to answer to the "mission of the school" (and not the public). I will admit the last sentence sounds ridiculous, but this is, in fact, what was said at the last meeting.
5. No trustee has been able to determine how many, and at what price, outside students will attend the private academy. Although estimates have been made on nearly every other issue, no forecast has been made on this subject even though the allowance of "tuitioning in" students is one of the justifications for a private school by the group seeking to close the public school (the voters, if elect to close the public school, will have foreclosed their ability to weigh on the matter of how those children's educations will be financed).
6. Although I will admit to not having an understanding of special education requirements as they are mandated by the State of Vermont, my observation of the last public meeting was that those in attendance on October 11th who do have an understanding of this very complicated topic raised several concerns about the latest

application of the private academy to the Vermont Board of Education as it relates to Special Education and the ability of a private academy to deliver such services.

7. Even though several senior members of the SVSU staff (the superintendent, chief financial officer, and chairperson) were present at the 10/11/12 “public information system” they were not allowed a chance to speak. In fact, when the chief financial officer (Rick Pembroke) did speak to address an issue that targeted him personally, he was told, literally, to “shut up” by the moderator of that meeting, Ray Mullineaux (chairman of the North Bennington Prudential Committee). Indeed, it is difficult to have a “public information meeting” when several people with knowledge on subject are refused the opportunity to speak in what is supposed to have been an open meeting.

8. Even though the NBGS Prudential Board, ISIS Committee members, and Trustees of the private academy all deny ever having stated closure of this school was imminent unless it was reopened as a private school, fliers have now been seen in North Bennington claiming the school will close unless there is a vote to re-open it as a private academy. Earlier this week, Eva Sutton, co-chair of the proposed academy’s Board of Trustees, would not answer a question from a local journalist (Patrick McArdle – Rutland Herald) about whether the mailing came from or was approved by the trustees.

Perhaps in the future the time will come when a private academy is the right thing to do in North Bennington. Even Ms. Sutton, at the 10/11/12 meeting, called the decision to open a private academy at this time a “calculated risk”. By any measure and by all accounts, the current school is a very high-performing, well recognized public elementary school the North Bennington community is, and should be, proud of. Too many issues regarding a private academy remain to risk shutting down a school of this caliber at this time.

If you are a North Bennington School District voter, protect your public school, and your ability to participate with your future votes, by voting “NO” on both ballot measures on October 23, 2012 at the North Bennington Train Station.

Jason Morrissey, North Bennington