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**Testimony to Committee on Education, Vermont Senate
February 28, 2014**

Here are six lessons I have learned about state-mandated school and school district consolidation from my experience as Policy Director of the Rural School and Community Trust (1997-2012). The Vermont experience could be entirely different, of course. If it is, it will be a remarkable achievement.

Lesson 1: It's always about the money. Not necessarily saving it, but redistributing it – between communities and among functions. Consider West Virginia, the most aggressive consolidator of schools. According to an award winning series of investigative reports by the Charleston Gazette:

- During 1990's West Virginia spent \$1 billion to encourage consolidation
- State officials acknowledge no money savings.
- 13% enrollment decline (-41,000), closed 300 schools, but experienced a 16% increase in local administrators. Centralized bureaucracies do not shrink, they expand.
- Higher percentage of budgets on maintenance/utilities than before
- Spends more of its education dollar on transportation than any other state.

Lesson 2: It's about schools, not districts. Because it's about money, the issue usually is focused on inefficient administration, and streamlining districts is the objective. But there is never enough money to be saved in closing districts, whether to redistribute funds or to cut budgets. The only real way to cut costs is to close schools, reduce teaching force, and increase class size. Closing districts dismantles the political apparatus that protects schools. Closing districts always ends up being but a prelude to closing schools.

Lesson 3: Consolidation is something the wealthy and powerful force on others without wealth and power... In Maine, protests from larger and wealthier towns won exemptions for them from the state's "everyone-must-participate" consolidation law. Fifty-five percent of the students in the state were in districts that were ultimately exempt from reorganization. Those districts forced to consolidate are mostly Down East, in the far North, or in the "rural rim" of towns that lie between the Interstate corridor and the unorganized Territories if the Northern Woods. The anger was so profound that the legislature ultimately amended the law to allow towns to back out of their consolidated district. It's a cumbersome process, but so far, 15 have done so.

In Arkansas, where consolidation was to be about districts, not schools, the 67 districts forced to close were disproportionately serving African American communities in the Mississippi River Delta region, or poor white communities in the Ozark or Ouachita Mountains. Within two years, 47 of the 134 schools operating in these districts were

closed. Schools that were closed had 21% higher student poverty rates and served nearly three times higher percentages of African-American students than the schools left open.

Lesson 4: Consolidation increases children's time on buses and crimps participation. In West Virginia, thousands of kids spend over 2 hours on the bus each school day. Some are on the bus longer each day than they are in the classroom. Another result: less participation in co-curricular activities, both because of longer bus rides and because there are fewer opportunities per pupil in larger schools. Most alarming: higher drop out rates. The higher dropout rate produces a hidden cost of consolidation: higher cost per graduate in larger schools.

Lesson 5: Bigger high schools offer more, but don't accomplish more. A Nebraska study found that larger high schools do offer more courses. However, participation in the curriculum is narrower, with some kids doing more but many more taking fewer classes across the curriculum. Study hall participation rates were highest in the largest high schools. In bigger schools, kids' participation is not as needed or as valued, they can hide from challenging courses, and no one goes looking for them, especially if they are poor test takers. Low-income children in particular do better in smaller schools.

Lesson 6: Democracy matters and attempts to veneer over the loss of local control with site management councils, advisory boards, community councils – it doesn't matter what name you use – do not excite public participation. If you think it is hard to get people to run for the school board, wait until you tell them that they can still come to the meetings, they just don't have any power. A community council is not a bridge, but a buffer between local citizens and centralized boards and administrations. Shrinking the public role in school decision-making means more arguing over where the money goes and whose school gets closed by which voters. It will reduce public support for education.

State-mandated cooperation is an alternative to forced consolidation. Cooperation among districts in some supervisory unions has proven effective in holding down costs. More administrative functions can be centralized if the districts delegate them to the SU or are required to do so. Purchasing, transportation, building maintenance and repair, book-keeping and finance, personnel, collective bargaining, data collection and management, special education, purchased professional and IT services, are possibilities.

With more support functions assigned to the SU, the district boards can focus on teaching and learning. But key to their success is that the administrator closest to them – the school principal – has the authority within the bounds of SU-wide policies and goals to implement their decisions. If superintendents have too many meetings to go to, they have not delegated enough authority and responsibility to principals.

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