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Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home by Susan Clark and Woden Teachout (Chelsea Green, 2012)

All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan (Ravenmark Publishing, 2005)

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify.

In my role with “Vermonters for Schools and Community,” I really come at this from the “community” side. And I really appreciate that you on the Education Committee are looking at all sides of this issue—education, finance, but also community. Because schools and community are woven together. In Vermont, we simply can’t pull on the strand of “schools,” and expect it not to have an effect on the other parts.

What do I mean by community? There are lots of different definitions, but one key element surely is social capital—that web of connectedness that makes us feel responsible for each other. Trust, volunteerism, tolerance. These are the kinds of things scientists measure when they measure social capital and “civil society.”

Social capital is very important. It’s been called the WD40 that keeps society lubricated. It’s good for the economy. It is linked to effective governance, to health, and even to happiness. But it’s notoriously hard to create.

A number of studies consistently rank Vermont among the highest states in America for social capital. In study after study, we’re almost literally off the chart.

Some of the education proposals you’re seeing offer incentives—or mandates—to combine decision-making into larger units. For instance, to consolidate and reduce the number of school boards. I’ve heard some people suggest that “we’ll still have local governance; we just have to re-define the meaning of local.”

But Vermont has among the strongest communities in the country. This is a quality that is notoriously difficult to foster, but “local” is probably THE single thing Vermont does best.

Social science research suggests that our local governance structures, like town and school meetings and empowered school boards, may be why.

Other states are desperate for what we take for granted. Sure, it's more pleasant to live in a place with high social capital—for instance, rather than focusing on our differences, it makes us more solution-oriented. But there are unseen benefits of citizen engagement too, that might surprise you. Three examples:

- **1: Economic strength:** Researchers have found a correlation between citizen engagement and community resilience against unemployment (e.g. 2011 National Conference on Citizenship report).
- **2: Responsiveness in crisis:** During Irene, we saw the outpouring of volunteers, readily mobilized by experienced citizen-leaders. One of the lowest-cost ways to prepare for crises is to strengthen community engagement.
- **3: Building leadership:** One-third of Vermont legislators served first in local office. And Vermont has the 2nd highest percentage of women-legislators in the U.S. Let's keep in mind that school issues are an especially important starting place for women. In order to encourage citizens to rise into leadership, the ladder has to have bottom rungs. Whether you're a Democrat or Republican, remember: school boards are your farm team.

So rather than “re-defining local,” Vermonters for Schools and Community believes it makes sense to build on our strengths. Rather than pushing one model—especially one larger model—to answer our school issues, V4SC supports the proposals that call for improving information flow, offering communities many options, and letting communities work it out for themselves.

We're excited about this inclusive conversation you are hosting. And to help it along, V4SC has created a comparison chart of the various education reform proposals that are out there now. It's based on various groups' written proposals and what we've heard them say.

It includes:

- Vermonters for Schools and Community
- Education Finance Working Group Report
- Accountable Education Funding Working Group (Report and testimony, Heidi Spear)
- Governor Shumlin (based on his letter to Secretary Holcombe and his Budget Address
- H. 883
- Vermont State Board of Education's 2015 Legislative Agenda
- Campaign for Vermont
- AOE's priorities (based on Sec. Holcombe's 1/9/15 presentation to the Legislature)
- Vermont NEA
- Vermont School Board Association

Topics range from Governance, Tax Structure, and Funding, to Performance.

This is a work in progress. So if anyone feels like there's an X in the wrong place, please contact us and we'll update it. In the spirit of collaboration, we are happy to offer this as what we hope will be a useful tool in the conversations to come. Thank you.