

Testimony to the Vermont House Education Committee Regarding Act 46

Wednesday, November 18, 2015

Presenter:

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Summary

My name is Dorinne Dorfman. I am the principal of Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School located in southeastern Vermont. Diversity has a positive impact on students' wellness and academic performance. In my school, our rich diversity is at stake by moves to fracture the union school system that has worked for many years. Act 46 mandates redefining school districts. Our school has little influence over these decisions. That is why I am representing my students here today.

Disadvantaged students – those with disabilities or from low-income backgrounds – greatly benefit from learning alongside advantaged peers, who in turn, learn more deeply and become peer tutors and counselors. They learn to communicate and work with anyone, and become accepted to some of the most prestigious colleges in America. This is public education in the service to our community and our state.

Losing Our Community

Among our 5 union towns is Jamaica, which has the highest poverty rate of any of our schools. Over the past few weeks, Jamaica has been courted by schools outside of our union. At a Jamaica School Board meeting, representatives of the private Mountain School presented their plans to construct a new facility, offering to accept tuition if Jamaica Village School were to close. The Flood Brook School Board in Londonderry, from a different supervisory union, invited Jamaica in for similar talks. These are examples of how Act 46 can pressure a town to consider taking students away from Leland and Gray and the union school system that has worked so well for Jamaica's students.

The impact on Leland and Gray if Jamaica Village School closes is substantial. Any splitting off of our union towns will accelerate the socioeconomic divide and increase the proportion of students with disabilities in our school. This year, nearly half of my students from the school-choice towns of Dover, Marlboro, and Winhall, receive special education services. This percentage will only increase if Jamaica leaves our school district or has school choice.

Leland and Gray Provides Excellent Education

The 5 union towns whose children attend Leland and Gray are geographically isolated and economically struggling. Our students participate in over 20 Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses, with 60 to 70% of seniors accepted to college each year. More Leland and Gray lower-income and higher-income students achieve the standards on NECAP tests than in the four Vermont Town Academies in math, reading, and science (Vermont Agency of Education). Our unified pre-K–12 system aligns curriculum and interventions to educate the whole child. Leland and Gray is not small by Vermont measures, with an average of 53 students per grade. Yet our socioeconomically diverse student body is in serious jeopardy.

Research on school choice in Vermont as well as Leland and Gray's own demographic trends demonstrate that students and parents select schools based on social class, with more affluent families choosing those in higher-income areas (Mathis and Etzler; Meyers). This reduces the population of our school and increases the concentration of disadvantaged students. Combined this trend will reduce our advanced programs, increase our costs, lower school achievement, and dim students' futures.

School is not just 8 to 3. Over 75% of Leland and Gray students participate in co-curricular athletics, theatre, and music programs and clubs. We provide Journey East, a semester of intensive arts and Asian studies, producing an original performance and touring for a month in China. Every summer our school is full of children participating in camps with free meals for everybody.

Potential Harm to Our Students and Parents

If Leland and Gray closes, what would become of the hundreds of teens in the West River Valley? They'd be scattered and ignored in distant schools. Few could stay after school due to lack of transportation, and their parents wouldn't drive 60 miles round-trip to support them. Their graduation and college admission rates would plummet and their victimization and participation in criminal activities may increase. Their talents that Leland and Gray cultivates would wane without their caring teachers as mentors and coaches and neighbors.

Taking Care of Our Community

Leland and Gray helps solve community problems. In 2012, one of our students completed suicide. Three of our elementary schools went into mourning. Leland and Gray became the crisis support center. We received a grant to provide mental health and social services at four Windham Central schools.

Last year, 4 Townshend residents were shot to death. Three were former Leland and Gray students in their 20s. We mobilized once again to support the many families and children affected by this enormous loss. Leland and Gray staff reached out to local clergy and others to organize and fundraise, and let hope back in.

These efforts have become our norm. For example, last week a student punched a locker. At Leland and Gray we take any sign of self-harm very seriously. No fewer than 5 professionals intervened to protect his safety: his teacher, the nurse, the school social worker, the campus supervisor, and I, his principal. In addition, we partner with West River Family Dentistry and Grace Cottage Hospital, just a walk down the block. Together we take care of the kids of our 5 union towns, an ideal arrangement for our families, an arrangement we could expand within our union district. This communication and support would disappear if students were commuting far away.

Our union school district has overcome many hardships. We are a resilient community. Leland and Gray's geographic location is fundamental to our community's wellbeing. Our diversity is our greatest asset in providing an excellent education for all, during the day, after school, and in summer. Jamaica is at a critical juncture. Their decision risks the education of the children from all our union towns. Act 46 affords Leland and Gray little influence over their learning and future. We should do right by all our kids, including our teens, and protect the education and diversity we know work. Thank you.

Works Cited

- Mathis, William and Deborah Etzer. "Academic, Socioeconomic and Transportation Correlates in a Rural Public School Voucher System" Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Education Finance Association*. Albuquerque, NM: March 2002. Print.
- The John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont. "Abridged Transcripts of Proceedings." *Democracy, School Choice, and Conflicting Interests: An Interactive Forum*. Montpelier, VT: February 1999. Print.
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