

Testimony Friday February 13th 2015

What is opportunity?

- The recently approved Education Quality Standards EQS are the most current definition of what opportunity should look like in Vermont.
- While we have a definition we do not have an assessment system to hold schools accountable for meeting the standards.
- There is considerable public confusion in the discussion – do you intend to increase opportunity by providing more choices for students or do you intend to increase opportunity by tackling the issue of equity of opportunity?

RECOMMENDATIONS –

Define what you mean by opportunity clearly

Require a system to assess access to opportunity based on EQS similar to public school approval in the 1990's

Include non-educators, school board members, staff from other agencies, students' at the high school level and community members in review teams

Ensure reviews take place at the SCHOOL as well as the district level.

No school should get a pass when it comes to opportunity

- Simplistic comparisons of school A to school B lead to assumptions and inaccurate generalizations.
- This kind of finger pointing suggests issues of opportunity and efficiency are not a shared problem; this is not supported by data. The picture of opportunity is more complex.

RECOMMENDATIONS –

ALL Vermont schools need to examine how they are providing opportunities and impacting the achievement gap, no one should get a pass.

All schools should be compared to a clear high standard – EQS

Public reporting of findings should be required

Outcomes are equally important

- Course listings alone tell us little. They don't tell us who are taking the courses nor how they are doing academically. They don't tell us who is sitting in study hall and not taking advantage of the courses nor do they tell us what personalized opportunities a school is offering not reflected in course listings.
- Generalizations such as these without sufficient data can lead us to draw inaccurate conclusions which potentially could do harm to our system.
- Conclusions are being reached about small schools based on word of mouth anecdotal stories not facts.

RECOMMENDATIONS –

Support the ability of the AOE and local districts to collect and report data illustrating opportunity beyond test scores.

Prioritize building a much richer data picture.

Who gets to decide?

- Given a richer data picture who gets to decide next steps? Historically Vermont communities have made good choices for their children within the limits of what hard working Vermonters can afford. Vermont communities have a past track record of wise stewardship of their schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS –

Move forward in PARTNERSHIP with local communities.

Do not impose one size fits all mandates.

Incentives and Flexibility

- The state has had very few takers based on the provisions of Act 153/6. WHY?
- Of the few changes resulting from Act 156/3 no one model has resulted, 3 or 4 different models have developed.
- Elimination of local community voice in decision-making is a key reason as is skepticism that this kind of change will result in cost saving and increased opportunity.
- Act 883 from last year was written in the vein of “ if they won’t do it voluntarily make them” this was also not successful.
- The recent approval by the SBE of the disbanding of WNSU and its merger into 2 other SU’s is an alternative way forward. Each school district retains their community voice in decision making while one complete central office is dissolved.

RECOMMENDATIONS –

Increase options for flexibility.

If districts can show savings and efficiency allow them this flexibility.

Currently governance change is incentivized with no guarantees of results when it comes to savings or opportunity.

Incentivize what you want to have happen rather than require change without guarantee.

Choose high quality schools over longer bus rides

- Does a child have the opportunity to go to a school in their own community particularly during their early years?
- How long a bus ride is too long for a 5 year old?
- The 2009 study on geographic isolation is inadequate as it measures distances by car from school to school not by bus rides.
- Families do not move to communities without schools. They buy shop spend and live in communities with schools.
- Schools contribute to community identity, development and economic viability.
- Thriving rural communities have schools. Without them they become shells.
- Open doors to innovation, improved technology use, place based /community based learning and personalization including the full implementation of Act 77, all these approaches are ways to creatively problem solve statewide in all schools.
- In this era of standardization and high stakes testing multiage classrooms have decreased.

RECOMMENDATIONS –

Direct the AOE to recalculate geographic isolation based on realistic bus routes and the time from a child’s home to the next nearest school

Incentivize innovation and technology use.

Support the full implementation of Act 77

AOE should provide increased PD support for multiage learning environments.