

Testimony on School Choice

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Introduce Myself: PhD/teacher/consultant, school board member, founder of Compass School

Driving question in my career: How do we provide the best education for every child in VT in a cost effective way?

School choice as important to achieve stated goals of Act 46: Equity, Opportunity, and Economic Efficiency

Equity is not equality: Equality works if everyone starts at the same place. Equity aims to give people what they need—a fair chance at success.

Two Big misperceptions impact ed policy making are:

1. learning is just about academic classes
2. the myth of the “normal” kid (well fed and well rested, prepared for school, enthusiastic learners).

Education is easy if all kids were like this. Normal kids are inexpensive to educate. Normal was never the norm, and getting less so.

Identified risk factors: 50% low income, 20% SPED, 1 of 4 mental health, and 20% feel hopeless to the point of suicide. Children are diverse in a great many respects. Educational “experts” solutions for diverse learners: differentiate, MI, PLPs—limited effectiveness—difficult for teachers. Not a solution for kids where their challenge isn’t necessarily just a classroom issue but something that affects them in passing periods, the lunch room, at home, in their community.

At risk kids are not just the most difficult (out of district, SPED) for whom we often spend a lot of money.

A lot of youth can be described as Quirky kids/misfits—what I call the near special ed—struggling with homelife, relations with peers, learning differently, maybe are very creative, or questioning of gender, sexuality, etc.

These are kids who are potentially expensive for society or schools and who often need something different (not equal) to the prototypical normal kids.

Note these are good kids—smart, creative, insightful, clever...

In discussions about choice, we should distinguish MS/HS vs elementary school—Elementary age kids are developmentally at a stage of norming and developing to fit in, but by MS/HS, some kids have determined they don’t fit in factors having to do with peers, learning style, interests, or school size. These kids can become hopeless without opportunity for a fresh start or a different learning environment.

Compass was founded largely to serve these quirky kids who didn't fit elsewhere. Misperceptions of Independent schools as better and elitist. Not better but different in style, size, personalization, flexibility, responsiveness—different in ways that can work for these quirky kids and help them find success in school.

Kids choose Compass (and other independent schools) because they are not succeeding elsewhere. If they were succeeding, they would stay where they were. Most common attribute of our students is anxiety. Kids who come to Compass often look beaten down and lacking in hope-- low confidence, questioning of self and system, bullied, judged, fearful, unhappy with self or school.

Comprehensive Public high schools tend to be anxiety factories—high expectations and grades and rewards and punishments and lots of people and stimuli.

This works great for a lot of kids but not for those with anxiety or different learning styles or difficult home situations or unique personalities that don't fit with the mainstream.

Here is where the economic efficiency of comprehensive schools breaks down. Can't be all things to all people. Can't have grades as motivators for some and downplay grades for others. Or rally the school around sports teams, but shelter the non-sports minded from the school spirit. What works in school is the consistency of the school culture and these qualities work for many kids, but far from all. Adding "special" programs or accommodations for kids outside the mainstream feels like "add-ons" and isolates or marginalizes these students who already feel marginalized. At best, you end up with expensive accommodations (and continual challenges for teachers and administrators) and still dissatisfied kids and parents, drop outs or graduates unprepared for life after HS.

I have learned that most people have oversimplified visions of high school possibilities—the comprehensive public high school that is theoretically open to all and the elite, selective private college prep school. In fact there is a wide range of possibilities in schools, and we see this range of different school models here in Vermont.

Compass formed in 1999 as model of public choice—17 years of success working side by side with public schools to serve those who would be costly and struggling. Over 50% of Compass students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, historically our population is over 20% SPED, and our demographic reflects our local community, as stated in our vision statement. We educate students at per pupil cost thousands of dollars below our surrounding public schools.

Over 17 years, we are proud of our virtually 100% graduation rate, 90+% accepted at college (many who are first generation college attenders), and maybe most importantly, these student blossom and thrive and leave as self-aware, self confident individuals ready for life beyond high school.

Compass offers hope and expands opportunity when the local public MS/HS is not working for an individual.

Example of a struggling student who was bullied in his school with one class per grade but the public school still contended they could provide a safe learning environment. Parent had to fight, even in the courts, to get the district to pay for his

placement at Compass, which was less costly than any public option, and where he hasn't needed special education services and where he is thriving.

Easy in this meeting room to focus on schools and not individual kids and that is part of policy making, but we need to remember the interests of individual children and their families when we seek to look out for every child in our state.

Act 46 noble goals, but it is likely to result in unintended consequences. In the interest of equality, Act 46 will lessen equity and opportunity and likely increase costs as individual kids who aren't served well in their designated middle or high school have no options and no hope and become an increasing cost to the system.

As a school board member, I appeal to you to prevent the cost to community cohesion in districts like ours in WNESU, WSESU or Windsor where tuitioning and non tuitioning districts are pitted against each other instead of working together, as they long have in "merged" supervisory unions. Allowing tuitioning and non tuitioning districts within merged districts would greatly ease the consolidation process in many parts of the state.

Ultimately, I hope you can see that education policy needs to be less about schools and more about the school system. VT uniquely able to provide opportunities from the tech schools, to historical academies, to its public and over 100 independent schools.

The best and most cost effective way to achieve equity, opportunity, and economic efficiency is not through lessening choice, but instead advocating for a system of publicly accessible choices to give each and every child the opportunity to get what he or she needs to find success in school and beyond.

