

Benefits of Small Schools – Legislative Committee – M. Jaye Young, Concord, VT

MY CREDENTIALS:

Just a little background so you know who I am and what experiences back my testimony.

I am a graduate of St. Johnsbury Academy Class of 1979 (I ranked 26th in my class)

I have an Associate's Degree in Court Reporting from Champlain College.

I have owned my own business and worked in the court reporting field for 34 years.

During my career, I have had extensive opportunities to hear people's life stories.

I have also served on the local school board and have held offices in various organizations.

I have homeschooled my children to various points in their education

I have successfully launched 6 children and have two married daughters: one who worked through college and graduated from LSC

One who attended UVM on scholarships and graduated from UVM's School of Business magna cum laud and currently an audit supervisor for a major Vermont accounting firm.

(Her husband, also a Concord grad, graduated from UVM with a B.S cum laude and other awards.) All three have remained in Vermont and are valuable citizens and employees.

I also have a daughter who graduated from Florida Institute of Technology School of Business magna cum laud, having attended with the help of significant merit scholarships. She was hired by her college alma mater as an admissions counselor

traveling to places like Atlanta, LA, and Chicago to market the school

I also have a daughter who graduated from a university in S. Carolina where she played soccer on a Div III team and graduated with a degree in Health Promotion and Fitness.

Her goal is to attend graduate school.

And I have two more children attending college; both have competed academically and athletically. (This information is to show that graduating from a small public school was NO detriment and actually afforded them opportunity.)

Currently, I have two children attending Concord High School, one who hopes to attend UVM and become a great science teacher and one who is interested in becoming a forensic investigator.

Having achieved in their small high-school setting opened up opportunities they never could have afforded otherwise.

During the past several years, I have given much thought and consideration to what is best for our local students. I continue to revisit and explore this by asking questions of high school and college students whenever the opportunity arises. My goal has always been to support what is best for our citizens.

That being said, I would like to share some of what I have learned. Now, these comments are specific to the school our family attends, because that is where most of my knowledge and experience comes from. It also resonates with my experiences as a child attending small, very localized elementary schools in St. Johnsbury and transitioning into a larger junior high and even larger high school.

1) BUILDING LEADERS

All students in small schools (not just natural-born leaders) have significant opportunity to lead and are encouraged to fill leadership roles. This creates future leaders, who then go on to fill leadership roles in college and community. Students from these small schools go into adulthood knowing they can be a voice and can take on leadership positions, **because** they have already done it. They think outside the box, create solutions, and are not afraid to ask for help when they have questions, because those opportunities have already been afforded to them during high school. I can think of many Concord HS students who have gone on to be leaders at colleges like UVM and St. Mike's, the state colleges, and various out-of-state schools, and many who have been recipients of prestigious awards (Per capita the numbers are impressive.)

Many people who are business owners in our town graduated from the local small high school. Some are business executives and/or people who have obtained respected positions in state government. They are strong voices for their positions. It seems sometimes they don't realize that having attended a small school had a great influence on why they are successful.

A more contemporaneous example of that learned leadership is this:

A few years ago an LSC professor commented about three of the Concord students who were taking a college class during high school. The professor was impressed that all three of these students offered a handshake and looked the professor in the eye when being introduced, and they were attentive. As I was thinking about this at the time, I realized that the commonality of these three students was that they were a captain of an athletic team. Part of their responsibility of being captain was shaking hands and greeting the opposing captains, coaches, and the refs before each game. This was an opportunity afforded to them as a result of being in a small school. I recently heard of two different local business executives who shared that they love hiring Concord High School graduates.

2) The More Is Better Mentality:

I don't buy it! In my lifetime, I have seen MORE and I have seen LESS. I can

attest that I have learned MORE when I have had LESS. I put in more effort and feel greater appreciation and satisfaction.

Because the class choices at our smaller school are limited, all course offerings are strong core classes, across the board. Less-academic students are expected to take difficult classes along with the so-called honor students. They don't have the choice to take less-challenging classes and just get by. It's full-time real learning for all students.

3) PARTICIPATION

Everyone can join. Participation in programs is proven to keep kids engaged, and it is a motivator to be a successful student. During Winter Carnival, everyone plays a major role. They learn about teamwork and healthy ways to have a good time. Music, Athletics, Drama: Everyone who tries out gets a part. Students learn much about life skills and achieving goals in these programs. They learn that they don't have to be the best at it to contribute to the success of the program; they need only give their personal best. And they work alongside students who are really talented, who they learn from. They don't just sit in the audience and wish if only they could be that good; they have the opportunity to work at it. And, at the end of the day, they realize the results of hard work. Most students at Concord participate in at least one of these programs.

A high percentage of students are inducted into National Honor Society and take part in other character-building and service-oriented programs. This is not by accident, but is because students have a high likelihood of success in a small community environment.

4) DROP-OUT RATES: Immeasurable because it rarely ever occurs. That means that nearly 100% of Concord students graduate, mostly because they feel valued.

5) COLLEGE and/or MILITARY enrollment: A high percentage of students enroll in colleges or enlist in the military. Students who go directly into the job market are often highly regarded by their employers (again, we have heard from these employers).
College matriculation rates for Concord students are also high.

HOWEVER, coming from a low- to medium-income community, most of these students would not be able to afford college if it were not for the scholarships they receive, including community organization awards and the Green and Gold Scholarship. (Over the past 10 years, nearly \$800,000 has been reported.)

6) CODY's Story: Cody had grown up in a Vermont town and had attended a larger high school. At his original school, he felt inadequate and had low grades. He

wasn't very athletic, not really at all, so he hadn't played on athletic teams. At the large school, he went through the motions of showing up.

During the summer after his freshman year, he moved with his mom to Concord. Cody started attending Concord High School as a sophomore, knowing absolutely no one. He remembers that first bus ride to school and how apprehensive he was.

On that first day of school, the Concord students welcomed him. Soon, they asked him to join the basketball team. Everyone loved him. He did play basketball. Though he was a newbie, the more experienced players came alongside him and encouraged him. He became an engaged student. Over Christmas vacation, his mom decided to move back to where they had come from. Cody was devastated; he dreaded returning to his previous school. So students brainstormed and came up with a living situation to allow him to stay and finish out the school year at Concord. With his family's support, and that of the Concord teachers, directors, and administration, he was able to do just that. Cody blossomed. He signed up for drama and played his part well. He played baseball. His grades went up. By the end of his sophomore year, he was a confident, successful young man. Though he knew he had to move from Concord at the end of the year, he had a plan. He went on to study at a high school tech center and was named student of the year as a junior. As part of that program he worked in the HVAC field his senior year and graduated. He enlisted in the Marines where he is doing very well. He comes back to visit Concord whenever he is home. He encourages his friends on facebook to get out and see more of the world. His year at Concord High School transformed him.

Cody is not the only one. There are many others like him: I have seen other students who had been unsuccessful at bigger schools and came to Concord and flourished. I have seen students who thought they would like to try larger schools but who came back to Concord with a greater appreciation for what they had. And I have seen some students go to larger schools and do well. But many students do better at smaller schools; for some, it's the difference between success and failure. Why would we put these young people at risk?

A final, yet very crucial benefit:

7) Parents have stronger oversight of their children if they are close by. No explanation needed; that's just reality. That is the strength and value of community; and Vermont is strong because of it. Small schools keep Vermont strong.

A couple of parting thoughts:

1) I believe adults are delusional if they think children should be handed the world on a silver platter. In fact, children become healthy individuals when they are taught strong basic foundations and then encouraged to, by their own hard work and perseverance, explore their passions and use their strengths. I

2) If school choice becomes the educational product of Vermont, I believe that the state-mandated, cost-creating regulations should be loosened significantly. In their place, put

transparent reporting practices, thereby letting the consumers do the “regulating” and allowing for more-affordable education.

3) I challenge you to look at drop-out rates and compare those numbers between schools and how it relates to larger and smaller schools. Based on Drop-out rates alone, are you willing to experiment with our students and sacrifice those at-risk students?

4) Think about Ebola. That dreadful disease is not new; it’s been in various communities for years. It wasn’t until it crept into the masses that it exploded.

I challenge you to look at the disturbing drug-abuse statistics at the larger schools. Do you believe that the students from our smaller school will benefit by being bombarded with hard-core drug issues? That, also, will put our students at risk -- a risk that far outweighs any benefit of having more course offerings.

Forcing parents to press their children into larger and larger groups is not in anyone’s best interest. In fact, having more smaller schools would transform our state into a much healthier environment where problems could be isolated and dealt with. In the end, the cost savings would be phenomenal. I beseech you to bravely explore the savings of life and dollars by wrapping our arms around the children in our communities and absolve ourselves of the horrific drug problems that blot out the future success of our kids. Small community schools can do that.

VERMONT CAN LEAD THE WAY

In conclusion, I urge you, as representatives of our rural and special state to engage with, walk along side of, and encourage the important work and influences of the small-school environment. The people of this state cannot afford to lose them.

THANK YOU for allowing me to testify
