

Testimony to Education Committees on January 29, 2015

My name is Andre Messier and I serve as the principal of Lake Region Union High School. Lake Region, located in Orleans County, is a 9-12 school with an enrollment of 350 and a demographic identifying it annually as one of the highest percentage population of socio-economically disadvantaged students among Vermont high schools.

Throughout the years, we have transformed our school culture and worked diligently to effectively close the achievement gap in student learning. Our efforts have been recognized nationally by the US News as we have been deemed as a Silver Medal School for the past three years. That recognition has caused Lake Region to become a school of choice for students from tuition towns as well as a "choice" school with a waiting list under the provisions of Act 129. This year we began the year with 23 total students attending Lake Region under the criteria established by Act 129's public school choice parameters. Nine (9) students chose to attend other schools. Next year, it appears that we will have 24-26 choice students attending Lake Region and only four (4) choosing another school.

It is nearly impossible to truly determine the financial impact on my budget by having an additional 20-30 students enrolled when I spread the choice population over four grades. I can't say that we would be able to reduce an English class here, or a math class there. In this third year of Act 129, the hidden financial impact to the taxpayers of the Lake Region community has materialized ...We have a proposed budget increase of -.02%; we are educating more students than last year; however, our equalized pupil number has decreased, which increases the local tax rate. Because Act 129 stipulates that the student is counted by the resident school district and not the school district where the student is actually being educated, the tax payers of my community, and who I would remind to those listening are among the poorest in the state, are left to bear an additional education tax for educating students that are not theirs.

Our Board and administration fundamentally believe and support the idea of public school choice or school choice among schools who do not have a selective admittance policy, and we are proud that students from outside our supervisory union are choosing Lake Region Union High School as the institution to receive their education. However, it should not be a financial burden to our community.

I have read the Agency of Education's School Choice Funding Recommendations report to the House and Senate Education Committees which outlined potential options for changes to the school choice funding system. I understand that it would be difficult for a sending school to lose the entire equalized pupil amount, however, I feel that the current system certainly does not provide an incentive for a school to truly evaluate why students are choosing to receive their education in another setting. In our experience, 22 of the 23 students attending Lake Region this year are coming from the same supervisory union. The reasons that most of the students cite on their applications for wanting to "choice" to our school are: "better quality of education"; "better special education department"; "school safety". Of the nine students from our district who are "choicing" to other schools, the reasons given are: "to play a sport that we do not offer"; "access to an integrated arts program"; "parents work in the school system". The reasons given in the different situations are fundamentally different reasons for choice

and the current system provides the other school no reason or incentive to look at making changes to address educational system quality matters, which is not in the best interest of students. Allowing students to choice for those reasons will not be the answer to educational quality issues so long as the current funding, or lack there of, is in place.

I thank you for allowing me to share my concerns and for listening. I look forward to seeing the direction that the legislature chooses with regard to public high school choice and it funding.

Andre M. Messier, Principal  
Lake Region Union High School