

Testimony for the House Education Committee:

Chris Tormey, Vermonters for Schools and Communities

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak with the members of this committee this morning as a member of Vermonters for Schools and Communities. My name is Chris Tormey. I have taught science at Lamoille Union High School in Hyde Park for the past twenty-five years. I live in Cabot, and have served on the school board there for over a decade. My wife and I have three sons, all of whom graduated from Cabot High School.

The school that I teach in has about 150 students in each grade and draws students from six surrounding towns. In contrast, my sons were educated in a school with between 15 and twenty-five students per grade that come mainly from Cabot, with a few tuition students each year from neighboring towns.

From my experience with Cabot High School, I strongly believe that small schools are able to provide students with a strong academic foundation. In addition they can, because of their small size, involve students in a range of activities that develop skills in creativity, planning, collaboration and leadership at a level of student participation much higher than is generally possible at larger schools.

For over a decade Vermont and several other states used the NECAP assessment to provide one measure of academic progress. In the two most recent tests administered in the areas of math, science, reading and writing (2012-2014), 48% of eleventh-graders in Vermont earned scores of “proficient” or above on an average of all four tests. By the same measure, 53% of 11th graders at Cabot School were ranked proficient, while students of the same grade at U-32 High School and St. Johnsbury Academy earned ranks of 54% and 46% respectively.

Many high schools across Vermont have sought to challenge their students by offering “Advanced Placement” courses, in which students strive to earn college credit after completing rigorous course work. Across Vermont in 2014, 12% of 11th- and 12th graders took an AP exam for college credit in either math or science. At Cabot in the same year, 38% of juniors and seniors took AP Biology.

Other electives and extracurricular activities enjoy high rates of participation at Cabot. Approximately 40% of high school students learn a foreign language, and over 50% participate in a varsity sport. Between 30% and 40% of students are involved in band and/or chorus, and the band last year composed a number of songs and went on tour as “the Limes”, and eventually recorded a CD. Each year the entire high school (all the students) organize and perform in a large musical production. Students are involved in everything from building sets and figuring out lighting to acting or accompanying with an instrument. These performances take place in the school’s CSPAC building (which the students helped to build a few years back) and are extraordinary in scope and talent. Last year the production was a musical celebrating the themes and melodies of the Beatles; this year the students worked to adapt the folk opera “Lillian” for performance in Cabot, and the young playwright who wrote the opera travelled from California to see it performed here.

Cabot encourages its students to develop and complete projects that build important skills and also connect to the community. Students in a biology class learned about water quality and stream erosion while working with a scientist to design and build a new access to the Winooski River. An unused room was converted to a school café by a group of students that learned business and marketing skills in the process. Many of the school’s courses require students to perform in-depth research and then present their findings to the community.

In summary, I believe that small high schools like Cabot’s can provide an excellent education. However, eliminating supports currently in place for these schools (like the Small Schools Grant and the protection in the Equalized Pupils formula against sudden drops in student numbers) would dramatically increase the local property tax and would likely lead to the closure of a number of small schools.

The high value of small schools in academics and student involvement should be considered alongside discussions about their relative cost.