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Vermont's social fabric at risk

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In Vermont, schools and community are woven together. We simply can't pull on the strand of "schools" without having an impact on our communities—or possibly unraveling them altogether.

There are many definitions for "community," but one key element surely is social capital — that web of connectedness that makes us feel responsible for each other. Trust, volunteerism, tolerance. These are the things scientists look for when they measure social capital and civil society.

Social capital has been called the WD-40 of communities. It keeps society lubricated. It's critical to the economy and to community resilience. It's linked to effective governance, to health, and even to happiness. There's just one problem: social capital is notoriously hard to create.

Scientists tell us that building social capital takes time — years, even decades — and this alchemy occurs not through socializing, but when people with different viewpoints and backgrounds work and solve problems together, repeatedly, over time.

Researchers consistently rank Vermont among the highest states in America for social capital. In study after study, we're almost literally off the charts.

Our local governance structures, like town and school meetings and school boards, are an important part of the reason. These are the places where people from diverse backgrounds come together, organically, over time, to do the work of building community.

H. 361, this year's education governance legislation, would likely lead to the elimination of about two-thirds of Vermont's school boards, replacing them with fewer, regional boards. In addition, legislators propose cutting support for small schools. Legislators make the extraordinary claim that Vermont will still have "local governance" and "local schools"; it's just that we will have to "re-define local."

Vermont has among the strongest communities in the country. Why would we want to "re-define local" when "local" is probably the thing Vermont does best?

The golden strands of social capital are woven into our fabric — but they can just as easily be torn loose. Researchers have found that social capital is more often found in concentrated urban areas and in small rural communities. The places where social capital is least likely to flourish — America's civic wastelands—are our suburbs. Here are the communities that have lost their centers, where neighbors don't know neighbors, where we shop at regional malls, and where distant commissions govern.

Nobody ever got up early on a Saturday and frosted a batch of bake-sale cupcakes to benefit their solid waste management district. And I doubt anyone has ever strapped on their tool belt and volunteered to insulate the regional planning commission office. It's just not how we think about regional entities. The farther they are from us, the more these entities become a "they." The most they can hope for from us is our tax dollars — and even these, we give grudgingly.

What will happen to our local communities if we "re-define local," and replace democracy with bureaucracy? Research on Vermont town meetings shows that when we water down opportunities for democratic engagement, citizens turn away. They are measurably less likely to participate in large bodies where their vote is diluted. They are too busy for informational meetings where they have no power. And they lose connection when the issues they're asked to consider are pre-determined. It doesn't mean they don't vote — although emerging research indicates that they may be more likely to vote no.

This effort to "re-define local" in our education system will not only be tragic for our communities. It will be tragic for our children.

Vermont schools function best when the community is involved. The future of public education depends on communities full of people who are willing to pay for good education — with their time and their wisdom and their dollars — even though their immediate interests are

not at stake. For this, we need their democratic engagement.

We need citizens to view education as the most important long-term public issue. To ensure this, they must be brought into the process of educational policy decisions, not steered away from it.

As currently drafted, H. 361 will not guarantee savings or property tax relief. It threatens small schools, based solely on their size rather than performance. And it will wreak havoc on our local democracies. More research is sorely needed to determine how best to offer equal educational opportunity for Vermont's students. Without it, H. 361 is a blunt and destructive instrument.

This is not the bill Vermonters want — as witnessed by the speed with which hundreds of signatures have accumulated on a petition at www.vtschoolsrock.org, urging the Legislature not to pass the bill this session.

Leaders need time to collaborate with communities and schools to improve our system, using solid Vermont-based data. The Legislature must exhibit the grace and humility to recognize that the bill is not ready for passage this year.

Susan Clark is a professional facilitator and co-author of “Slow Democracy” (with Woden Teachout) and “All Those in Favor” (with Frank Bryan). She is the town moderator of Middlesex.

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