

Vermonters for Schools and Communities

Testimony to Senate Education Committee

Thursday March 19th, 2015

Chris Tormey, Steering Committee member, V4S&C and Chair, Cabot School Board

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with your committee about House bill 361, and specifically about Section 17 of that bill which deals with potential changes in governance for Vermont schools.

Vermonters for Schools and Communities has concerns with several of the provisions of H.361. Our testimony this afternoon will mainly address the language in Section 17 which mandates some form of school consolidation. In its most current version, we understand that H.361 now mandates that schools below a certain size must either form a preK-12 school district or a preK-12 supervisory union of at least 1100 students. While we see this change from the original bill's language as a step in the right direction, we do not support the mandatory consolidation of Vermont schools into larger units.

We understand that the premise underlying the push to consolidate smaller schools into larger districts (and for the language of Section 17 in particular) is that, by doing so, the educational opportunities and outcomes for students will be improved and the cost of providing that education will be reduced.

Based on our experience as school board members and on a broad range of data collected and published by the Vermont Agency of Education, we do not believe that premise to be correct.

Small schools in Vermont can be equally or more effective than larger schools at providing high quality educational opportunities to a significant portion of their students. Because of the relatively small size of our high school in Cabot, 38% of our juniors and seniors in 2014 took an AP science course, one-third were involved in band or chorus, and better than half played a varsity sport. In the two most recent statewide NECAP assessments, 31% and 37% of eleventh-graders across the state earned scores of proficient or above in science and math, respectively. Average levels of proficiency for eleventh-graders at Craftsbury Academy and Cabot High School (two small high schools in northeastern Vermont) on the same tests were 36 % in science and 44% for math.

As a result of Act 77, schools across Vermont are being tasked to assist their students in designing a personal learning plan to reach their individual goals and to provide multiple pathways to get there. Because of their size, small schools are ideally suited to lead the way with these initiatives. Earlier this winter, Twinfield and Cabot Schools were two of three schools selected in Vermont for a prestigious Great Schools Partnership grant to receive assistance next

year in developing proficiency standards for graduation across their curricula and in developing varied learning opportunities for students to achieve them.

There does not seem to be a clear connection between school size in Vermont and the cost of education. About half of the Vermont schools that were recipients of Small Schools Grants in 2014 spent less per pupil (as measured by “education spending per equalized pupil”) than the state average. Among the 33 preK-12 school districts now functioning in Vermont, three of the largest districts (above 1100 students) had costs per pupil below the state average for 2014, while half of the 26 school districts of that type with less than 1100 students had per-pupil costs below the state average.

We are concerned that the arbitrary setting of a baseline student number below which districts would be compelled to consolidate with other schools according to the current House bill sends the message that schools below a certain size in Vermont are somehow faulty or ineffective, while those above that level are OK and thus exempted from mandatory change.

We would suggest that changes be made to H.361 to allow a more careful study of the benefits of creating larger districts, and that studies and planning for consolidation of individual schools be encouraged rather than mandated by this bill

Specifically, we suggest that the deadline for school districts to complete their reorganization plans be extended by two additional years (from 2017 to 2019) and suggest the same extension for the deadline for the reorganization to be complete with the approval of the State Board of Education (from 2019 to 2021). This extension will allow time for studies on schools’ success in meeting Educational Quality Standards to be completed; the results of those studies should provide a more thorough picture than we have now of what kind of schools in Vermont are most effective. It will also provide adequate time for schools considering combining to do a thorough and careful job of researching which arrangement would be most beneficial for their students before making that change.

We are concerned that H. 361 in its current form assumes that cobbling together smaller schools into larger districts will in itself result in improved educational opportunities and outcomes for students in these schools. However, we do not at this time have a clear idea of which of our schools in Vermont are performing poorly and which are performing well, and whether there is indeed a correlation between school size and quality. We suggest that this bill, rather than mandating a change in size that may or may not prove useful, instead mandate a comprehensive survey of the performance and outcomes of Vermont schools over the next several years and provide the resources needed to complete it.

The results of this survey can then be used to guide efforts to improve education in our state. If it clearly shows that larger school districts do a better job, then the current push to consolidate will have solid evidence supporting it. If the survey shows that smaller schools are also effective, it should drive a broader discussion about what specific qualities of schools (if not

size) seem to be correlated with student success. It should also cause policymakers to think carefully about eliminating existing supports for smaller schools. We may find, after these studies are completed, that supports like the Small Schools Grants have been monies well spent.

We know that a number of small school districts in Vermont have recently chosen to consolidate, based on their specific circumstances. As challenges associated with declining enrollments continue, it's likely that more schools will look carefully at the possible benefits of combining with other schools. But we strongly believe that these large, long-lasting decisions about school structure and governance should be made by the boards and communities that are most keenly aware of their schools' specific strengths and challenges. They should not be mandated by legislation from Montpelier.

Thanks again for the opportunity to discuss these issues with you this afternoon.