

Donald Collins Student Advocate and Interested Citizen
Broadway Street Swanton, Vermont
treasureguy68@hotmail.com
802-868-7975

Defining the problem: Based on my experiences-the "unrecovery" from the extensive recession has placed families, our youth and Vermont taxpayers in very insecure situations. Escalating property taxes during a time that wages have not increased is creating frustration and anger. Poverty is real and rising taxes are a great scapegoat.

Is lowering property taxes the main objective or is it how best to help every Vermont youth have a successful and rewarding educational experience? If it is the latter, let us focus on data that the Agency of Education has presented which youth living in poverty especially young boys need significant supports. Assisting families, who are living in poverty is not the sole responsibility of schools, so why don't use we the data we have and properly fund the support agencies, who can partner with schools to address the challenges. If property taxes are the issue, we need to be honest about the degree to which we will reduce the annual INCREASE in taxes and how consolidation of specific school districts will impact local taxes in our statewide property tax system. There is a great opportunity to mislead taxpayers on how this process will play out! How much; how soon needs to be answered! Will the reduction/savings in property taxes justify major policy shifts that may have a significant impact on the culture and future of some communities.

How do the goals of the legislature improve the lives of Vermont students? Academic success is important, but not at the exclusion of opportunities to participate in confidence building activities, taking risks and even failing in a supportive environment. The union high school movement of the 1960's made promises that were never realized. Science labs were better, course offerings were expanded and some students were provided increased academic challenges, but others got lost in the larger environment or never experienced opportunities that would help make them "well-rounded" citizens.

Survey results: Unclear definitions of terms such as (consolidation, lower taxes, expanded learning opportunities) are confusing the discussions and preventing the development of a realistic plan.

Ten face to face random inquiries indicated that four people expect to see lower school tax bills next year-like 25 to 33%; five people believe it will result in fewer superintendents; three people named the schools in Franklin County that they expect will be closed within a few years, two thought healthcare legislation would help, one person asked if teachers are part of the discussion and seven people indicated that schools are expected to do too much.

Are citizen expectations realistic? I do not believe we have defined what the terms consolidation or lower taxes mean. What will changes in governance or consolidated districts look like? Consolidation will have a very different impact on supervisory districts than it will on rural supervisory unions.

I agree that learning opportunities are not equitable throughout the state, but what can the legislature do that will make a difference? When I scheduled all students in a 900 student high school there were inequalities in science, languages and mathematics depending on the teacher you had. Mr. B's students always scored better in national mathematics test than students with the other teachers, who taught algebra, geometry, etc. Increased, expanded and improved learning opportunities for whom? Where does technology fit in the plan to expand learning opportunities at the middle and high school levels

Have you visited a school recently? Were the services similar to what you experienced as a student or what your children experienced? Have you listened to students, teachers and principals? Why destroy the concept of local schoolboards when the goals can most likely be achieved through the current supervisory union structure? Have you been updated by the Agency of Education as to whether there are laws/regulations in effect that are not being followed or have been waived?

I believe we can come to agreement on the main cost drivers, so why are we not focusing our time and energy on addressing them? In the process we just might nibble away at property tax increases and improve opportunities for students.

An idea that needs your support is one noted by Governor Shumlin and Secretary Holcombe regarding working with school districts on costs and learning opportunities. My interpretation of their remarks is the Agency and State Board will assist in the development of plans that will bring about desired changes. There will be clear expected outcomes and consequences. Giving the Agency and State Board the authority to move in this direction will allow local districts the opportunity to participate in a collaborative process where the voices of students, citizens and educators will be heard and creative solutions will be the outcome. ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL! Do YOU remember accreditation, NEASC, PSA and their impact on quality educational opportunities and outcomes?