

Helen Keith 4/22/15

Testimony on H 361 April 22, 2014

My name is Helen Keith, just received my Master's in Educational Leadership and Policy from UVM, and my background is in financial planning and systems integration especially as applied to early childhood and family support services. I live in Huntington, and twice Huntington has voted no on merger/consolidation, I was one on the "no" votes – but it was really a "yes" vote to maintain local governance.

The reasons I voted no to merger/consolidation twice in the last 5 years include: I did not (and do not even after reading through the current H 361 and much of the testimony that accompanies it) believe there was any proof – evidence on why communities should give up their assets and their local policy decision making responsibilities (perceived or otherwise) to a small regionalized board. The costs (including savings) were not well outlined and the identified benefits were vague. I did not see that it would save money, contain costs and I certainly did not see, other than incentives paid from the Education Fund, that it would address the longer term problem of the evolving bad social policy of continuing to rely on residential property taxes (there is an assumption that the income sensitivity makes up for this – but today that is not the case). These reasons are not addressed in H 361, therefore I propose that we make sure we are not addressing only myths, but reality.

So the myths that consolidation will fix educational outcomes (let's ask the students, families and teachers), and fix the reliance on residential property taxes are just that. If this bill passes without further thoughtful analysis and gathering of input, my fear is that the expenses associated with it (forced consolidation, tax incentives paid from Education Fund and tax penalties for communities that have already thoughtfully voted no) and the push for this kind of consolidation will take the issue off the table for a few years and not address either improved educational outcomes, cost containment or the property tax issues in any significant way. I am concerned we will be stuck doing something to address these issues of education opportunities, cost containment and property taxes, again in a few years. These issues need more study; change like this must be effective and not simply a perceived administrative easement.

It would be good to do a cost –benefit analysis/projection for H 361 before passing it – who will it benefit, how will students be impacted, what are the pluses and minuses for children, families, teachers, administrators, communities etc. Then this could be tracked so someone has a handle on what changes for which population and if in fact it has much to do with costs. Again, my concerns fall into the following categories:

The cost drivers including enrollment declines, increasing unfunded mandates, the increasing crises facing families and their children that play out in school environments, teaching to the tests approaches supported by too many administrators at all levels are some of them. But they haven't really been studied enough or if they have no one wants to address many of the (well attempts at addressing enrollment declines are being made but not in context of other issues facing families and schools). However with study it seems that the cost drivers could be identified and addressed by local school districts and communities, the Board of Education and the Agency of Education. Then several things could happen, a facilitated planning process using the identified cost drivers (leaving it open to add several based on community conditions/context) would produce recommendations for addressing our educational goals along with the proven ways to address cost containment (not just reductions in teaching staff and changes in class size) by examining what children need from school in order for them to be in a position to learn and take advantage of all that is offered. There could be more integrated/collaborative services and funding that already focus on the same children/students who are "hard to reach."

Again, why don't we put the students first and use that lens, then the teachers, then the boards and communities and then the administrators and gather the recommendations through a facilitated planning process, review them and then see what legislation would be effective in reaching the goals of improved educational outcomes, cost containment, and significant property tax relief or shifting to another financing resource. Thank you.

*we don't need an elegant system - we want a useful one*