

Jay Nichols 4/22/15

FRANKLIN NORTHEAST SUPERVISORY UNION

MEMO From the Desk of Jay Nichols

Superintendent of Schools

Serving the School Districts of:

Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, Richford

DATE: 4/22/15

TO: Senate Education Committee

FROM: Jay Nichols

SUBJECT: Education Bill

Good afternoon, my name is Jay Nichols; I am the Superintendent of Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union serving the communities and schools of Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford.

Our current educational delivery system, if you can call it that since "system" refers to some semblance of order, hinders the ability of our public schools to provide optimal opportunity for all Vermont students. In fact, in many cases, it is an insurmountable obstacle. Our current framework was developed before we had school busses, ready access to automobiles, cell phones, or even regular telephone service. How are our students supposed to compete in an increasingly globalized work force economy when we insist in educating them in a system that is archaic? Our current system values town residency and arbitrary geographic lines more than it values the learning of all Vermont children. The future success of our state depends on educating all Vermont children as best we can. Why continue to provide some students with lesser educational value simply because of where they live?

Small school systems often offer less opportunity for students than larger systems. This is especially true at the high school level. Students in really small high schools have less course

offerings than students in larger high schools. How is it equitable that a high school can offer a dozen Advanced Placement classes, for example, while another cannot afford to offer more than a couple when students live in close proximity to both schools? In elementary schools, less opportunity most often manifests in less art, library, technical education, foreign language, physical education, and other important offerings that end up being reduced or eliminated as communities struggle to support their school by passing budgets. Across much of the state, our ridiculous governance system gets in the way. We must have legislation that compels or seriously incentivizes the sharing of resources to increase opportunities for our students. I am not suggesting closing schools – I am suggesting that schools in towns adjoining each other become school districts so that together they are all responsible for all of the students in their area. We know that this will lead to more opportunities for students, save taxpayers money, and help us sustain our education system moving into the future. So, why not do it? Of course, the answer is always “local control.” Perhaps it is time to redefine “local” to something a little more flexible than an arbitrary town line. Remember, all Vermont children are our future – not just the ones who live in same town as we do.

Our current system is also very expensive. We have a state system for funding public education. When we protect some towns through small school grants, phantom students, and micro class sizes, everyone in the state pays for that in one way or another. Even if we decide, as a state, that we are not interested in spending less money on public education, can we at least agree to spend the money more intelligently?

Recommended Action Steps:

- Provide incentives for Supervisory Unions to become Supervisory Districts. Allow these new Supervisory Districts to deal with the high school choice issue as they see fit in cases where some towns have choice and others do not
- By some date certain, compel Supervisory Unions to become Supervisory Districts
- End the “Phantom Students” protection
- End Small Schools Grants unless geographically necessary

I recognize that my recommended action steps would take a lot of political courage and most students in Vermont are not able to vote. I hope the Committee will have the courage to put student learning first and make the tough decision that will be unpopular with people who are resistant to change.

Some things that have happened since our current governance Vermont Supervisory Union system was implemented (1892):

- Sherlock Holmes stories are first published (1892)
- Lizzie Borden found innocent of killing her dad and step mom (1893)
- Coca-Cola first sold in bottles (1894)
- First modern Olympic Games (1896)
- Work on the New York Subway system began (1900)
- President McKinley is assassinated/ Teddy Roosevelt becomes President (1901)
- Boston Red Sox win first World Series (1903)
- Ford Motor Company formed (1903)

I could go on but I think you get the point. Change is difficult. Everyone knows the current system impedes student learning and is very cost ineffective. It is much easier to do nothing than to do something. It is my hope that the Senate in collaboration with the House will actually make meaningful reform. Good luck!

Respectfully,

Jay Nichols