

My name is Joseph Kiefer and for the last 18 years I have been a place-based educational consultant with the Vermont Rural Partnership. Our work with between 17 and 18 small rural schools, located in the Central and Northeastern part of the state, began in 1996 with funding from the Annenburg Foundation as part of a national Annenburg Rural Challenge.

I am a product of a small rural school having grown up the 1950's in a small rural farming town in the Hudson River Valley, 35 miles west of Albany. As students and families, we all knew each other well and even called our cook— Aunt Eva and out Janitor Uncle Pete. Looking back some 55 years later I can say that coming from a small school, gave me a sense of intimacy, a sense of place and maybe most importantly a sense of wonder.

As someone who has first hand experience with students, teachers and administrators of these small schools, I can say without question that these small rural schools are the heart and soul of their communities and that they are succeeding in test scores, in student opportunities and in their use of technology that connects them to anywhere in the world.

When we say **place-based learning** we mean connecting the learning to the environment, the culture and the history of each unique town and community. Our three other VRP goals are •Student Voice, •school and community partnerships and •Assessment and Documentation.

Year after year I get to witness the incredible opportunities these schools create using their place as a springboard for all kinds of learning, from hands-on student research of their local environment, to student interviews and book writing of local elders, to nature trails and habitat studies to school gardens and farm to school, the list goes on and on. I get to see all these students who **WANT to go outdoors to learn**, to explore, to investigate, to solve local problems and share that learning with the community. Because of all of this learning of place and all the opportunities I see each year and the incredible commitment by teachers to connect students to the world - **I must oppose H 361!!!**

The argument of small schools not being able to provide sufficient learning opportunities is a myth!! It is not rooted in what I see going on in small rural schools. This is a very sad conversation for me as I feel this will lead to the undoing of what has made Vermont so SPECIAL—its rural schools and its deep sense of place, like no other in the world.

I wonder WHY are we willing to give up this precious and sacred heritage to a more urbanized and centralized reality?? Do we want all of Vermont to look like Chittenden County?? Dont get me wrong, I love going to Burlington for all it has to offer but when I'm done I go back to my rural town to live a much slower and peaceful existence.

When Vermont schools are the envy of the country because of our unique ways, our smallness and our high test scores why do we want to risk it and throw it all away? I fear this slippery slope of thinking where some legislators define small in terms of national definitions and that we don't even have small but we have tiny schools and tiny school districts. To that I say good. Lets go TINY and lets stay tiny. As a 40 year veteran educator, I can say I've seen so many trends come and go in our schools. I've seen urban schools seeking to create magnets of smaller schools so that students can have the relationships, the connection, the intimacy of learning that comes from that scale. We already have it so why give it up?

For me this feels a lot like the myth of progress, getting bigger to get bigger and giving up what works for an illusion of larger more efficient bureaucracy.

Rural schools work—grades and test scores prove it—if it aint broke why the rush and need to fix a problem that doesn't exist??

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views on this important bill.

Joseph Kiefer, M.A.