

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee, April 22, 2015

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Closing schools and getting rid of school boards. Make no mistake about it the goal of H361 passed by the Vermont House and now being considered by the Senate is about closing elementary schools and getting rid of elementary school boards. About reducing citizen and parent participation in the education of their children; about removing those pesky and annoying things, citizens and parents, from the bureaucrat's otherwise tranquil life. About giving over to the bureaucrats of the state more power, more control, more money.

This is not about good education. It's about centralized control. Moving parents out and far away from their responsibility and rights toward the education of their children.

No wonder the superintendents of supervisory unions are for it. They get to keep their profitable jobs and get more power and control, the dream of every bureaucrat.

Some lawmakers, including the governor, made a big deal last election about the high cost of education and that property taxes were supposedly going up out of sight. The news media gladly went along always looking for a juicy story to sell. There has been a lot of hype about the supposed high cost of education, but this spring 237 school budgets passed and only 20 failed.

Vermonters take the education of their children seriously and have historically been willing to finance good local education. Just

because a school is small doesn't mean it is providing inferior education. And it defiantly doesn't mean that costs are more.

Advocates of H361 claim that larger school districts will reduce costs due to efficiencies achieved in larger numbers of pupils.

However, the Vermont Agency of Education (VAE) web site in a table of figures titled, "PER PUPIL SPENDING BY DISTRICT TYPE," for fiscal 2014 for the whole state, both the voted school budgets per pupil and what VAE calls the spending cost of education per pupil increased as the size of school districts increased from less than 100 students to those over 1,000. Please check this out to assure yourself of the facts.

For 2014, the figures above, there is no savings for the 16 Vermont school districts over 1,000 students compared to all the rest of the districts, 92 of which are under 100 students.

Voters vote school budgets and not spending per pupil. The discussion about school costs currently raging, according to lawmakers and the media, is the high cost per pupil. Citizens are thinking about the budgets they pass, but lawmakers are talking about spending per pupil. There is a big difference. School spending per pupil as defined by VAE is much less because they subtract from the budget the following: 1, a possible budget deficit or surplus from prior year; 2, grants, such as small school grant; 3, federal dollars; and 4, privately donated dollars.

This calculation by VAE makes no sense because the cost of education is actually the budgeted amount passed by voters. That is the amount of money really spent. Not the so call school spending per pupil as stated by VAE.

This boils down to if your school district is good at obtaining any of these four sources of revenues your school budget may be high but your school spending will be much lower because, apparently, these four sources of income for your district for some reason don't count toward the overall cost of education according to VAE.

Take for example the Sherburne Elementary School in the Town of Killington, 59 students in school, with a 2014 school budget of \$26,642 per student and school spending of \$13,538, which is about the state spending average. One can presume that because Sherburne is a well off town that there is a lot of private money or money from somewhere coming into the system to support the budget.

Wherever the money comes from the Sherburne Elementary School budget of \$26,642 is twice the budget of the Town of Orwell at \$13,035. This imbalance surely seems to circumnavigate efforts by the legislature and courts to ensure a more fair and equitable education funding amongst towns in Vermont.

This ability of well off towns to find and spend money puts other towns at a great disadvantage when a spending cap is imposed because a well off town can find other money to make up reduced spending required by the cap where most towns don't have the resources, i.e. some industry or business providing property wealth.

The questions about school costs are important and should be studied from the point of why are costs so uneven in state? Why do some schools cost so much? Not about some wholesale forced reorganizing of districts where individual schools have no choice.

Other questions should be why do some schools do better than others? Is it money available or location or what is it? My feeling is the difference in school and student performance is reflected in the makeup of the community. I think an inescapable truth is that the education achievements of students; is dependent on parent's educational level and their accumulated wealth, that is investments, home ownership, and other measures of wealth. The real question in this educational debate should be how to level out that inequality.

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