

Vermont Communities Speak Out on Education Legislation Proposals

Communities across Vermont are weighing in on the issue of school district consolidation, small school support, spending caps, and H. 361.

Like Vermont's communities, each response is unique. Here is a sampling.

Windham Southeast Supervisory Union Board (WSESU)

Brattleboro Union and Brattleboro, Dummerston, Guilford, Putney and Vernon Town School Districts

Resolution on H.361 adopted on April 7, 2015 at the full meeting of the Board

To Governor Shumlin, our Windham County legislators and members of the Vermont State Senate and House, Secretary Holcombe and the Agency of Education, and the State Board of Education:

The members representing the six school districts of the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union Board issue this statement regarding the proposed H.361 legislation.

We are deeply concerned about proposed content and implications of H.361 which empowers the State Board of Education to determine the existence of our local school boards, and sets arbitrary spending caps without consideration of the true effects on the districts.

We are concerned that:

Student and school performance data is not incorporated or referenced in the proposed legislation as a comparative means of evaluating a school's and/or district's overall success.

Conditions that are known to affect learning outcomes, such as the proportion of students in poverty and students eligible for an IEP have not formed a part of any assessment of what is now being called "efficiency" in education.

The arbitrary spending caps as proposed will be imposed on all districts, with no consideration of the steps taken by individual districts to seek out and implement fiscal efficiencies and programming improvements. These include in our own area, existing voluntary cooperation with neighboring towns both inside and outside of the supervisory

union.

Further, no consideration is given to the considerable influence of current and proposed unfunded state and federal legislation (special education costs, food program requirements, pre-K - 12 programs), or for existing contractual obligations (contracts with teachers, food service, transportation companies), or for market fluctuations of necessary budgeted costs like heating fuel and other utilities.

We are concerned that the Agency of Education is not funded or staffed sufficiently to acquire a comprehensive view of the many schools and districts with a history of successful approaches to financial management and innovative educational programs.

While we oppose this bill in its present form, the member districts of the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union pledge to work with the Vermont Legislature, the Agency of Education, the State Board of Education and other Vermont school districts to lead in positive change by working collaboratively with all interested parties to seek solutions that are based on sound fiscal management, real data, and educational best practices

We will continue to seek and improve our own fiscal efficiencies and educational programs, while promoting collaboration within and outside of our member districts.

We will also continue to provide information to governing bodies and legislators on any far reaching effects of our efforts to achieve these efficiencies and disseminate to all interested parties those successful strategies.

Respectfully submitted,

The members of Windham Southeast Supervisory Union Board representing:

Brattleboro Town School District

Brattleboro Union High School District

Dummerston Town School District

Guilford Town School District

Putney Town School District

Vernon Town School District

“We are concerned that student and school performance data is not incorporated or referenced in the proposed legislation...”

North Country Supervisory Union (NCSU)

Brighton, Charleston, Coventry, Derby, Ferdinand, Holland, Jay, Lowell, Morgan, Newport City, Newport Town, Troy, Westfield

Resolution adopted on March 19, 2015 at NCSU Annual Meeting

RESOLUTION, Governance & Funding

The NCSU Full Board hereby rejects bill H.361 and any legislation that mandates consolidations, ends the small schools grant, hold harmless provisions and the imposition of any spending cap.

We believe that elimination of local school board governance is not conducive to promoting our democratic ideals, fostering social capital and the effective leadership of our community-schools. We encourage the legislature to work with the Agency of Education, Vermont Superintendents Association and Vermont School Boards Association to identify specific statutory adjustments that would strengthen the effective coordination and management authorities of supervisory union boards while maintaining local district boards. We believe resources should be provided to the Agency of Education to support voluntary governance consolidation.

We believe maintaining the small schools grants and current hold harmless provision are providing the financial stability they were intended to support. The elimination of these financial supports will have an adverse impact on schools ability to provide quality programs and service. We also believe that imposing a spending cap is not responsible public policy, unfair to low spending districts and erosion of our local democratic process.

Furthermore, we pledge to collaborate as a supervisory union and participate with the Agency of Education, Vermont Superintendents Association, and Vermont School Boards Association in promoting best practices to ensure efficient financial management, adequate and equitable learning opportunities for students and sustainable schools and communities.

“We believe that elimination of local school board governance is not conducive to promoting our democratic ideals, fostering social capital and the effective leadership of our community-schools.”

Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union (RNESU)

Leicester, Whiting, Sudbury, Brandon, Goshen, Pittsford, Mendon and Chittenden

Adopted on March 25, 2015 at RNESU Full Board Meeting

The RNESU Board issues a statement of concern with the House Education Committee's draft bill H.361. We are concerned with legislation which:

- Empowers the State Board of Education to determine the existence of our local school boards.
- Sets arbitrary caps which will be counterproductive to education equity across Vermont and, when combined with the elimination of the small schools grants, and the hold harmless provisions of Act 60/68, will significantly harm direct service to our students.

We encourage legislation that:

- Retains strong community values.
- Addresses equity, efficiency and quality.
- Keeps the needs of students and capacity of communities at the front of the design.
- Allows for adequate time for change to occur.
- Provides the appropriate resources for the Agency of Education to support local districts in providing quality educational service to all of their students.

Local districts can be held accountable the quality of educational services they provide to their students, however they should not be held responsible for variables in student population at the expense of the students who are there.

The Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union pledges to collaborate with and participate with the VT Legislature, the Agency of Education and the State Board of Education in promoting best practices to ensure efficient financial management, adequate and equitable learning opportunities for students and sustainable schools and communities. We ask the legislature and the governor to assist in this evolution by holding dear the education fund purely for PK-12 education purposes and for limiting mandates that increase costs to school systems and set schools up for failure.

“We encourage legislation that retains strong community values, addresses equity, efficiency and quality... and allows for adequate time for change to occur.”

Brattleboro, Vermont Town Meeting Resolution

Adopted at March 21 Representative Town Meeting, by a vote of 121-3

“Resolved, that the Members of the Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting do not support efforts by the Vermont State Legislature to empower the State Board of Education to determine the existence of the Brattleboro Town School Board.”

Newark, Vermont Town Meeting Resolution

Adopted at March, 2015 Newark Town Meeting

“We, the voters of Newark, would like the legislature to know we are in strong support of our extraordinary school with its beautiful building and grounds, shared resources, exemplary staff, technology, afterschool program and community support and believe that bigger is not always better.”

“We would like the legislature to know that ... bigger is not always better.”

Plainfield, Vermont Town Meeting Resolution

Plainfield, March 3, 2015 Town Meeting minutes

“After hearing our District Representative Janet Ancel speak on the consolidation bill the Town should respond by saying we are not in favor of losing our school or local school board.” The motion passed.

Peacham, Vermont School Board

Excerpts from Peacham School Board letter to Governor Shumlin

Dear Governor Shumlin,

...As you know, Peacham is a small town, with only just over 700 people. The school is the lifeblood of our community, which is small and isolated from other communities. It only has 50 students at the school, but those students come out of Peacham having a strong sense of pride in their community, ready for the next step of their education. I know how well they do at that next step because I teach many of them at St. Johnsbury Academy. And that, as you know, is the story with children across this state. We are a small state, but we educate its citizens well. Our students have a low drop-out rate, low teen pregnancy rate, and a high rate of success in academic achievement. That success is due to in large part to the caring schools that are directly tied to our communities, with low student-teacher ratios that ensure that children are helped as individuals, rather than slipping through the cracks.

When you take the small schools out of Vermont's towns, you are taking away the heart of the towns that often present the image that most out-of-staters-- and tourists-- see as Vermont. In our town, senior citizens help with the after-school program and French class. Working people donate their time to share experiences with the students so that they can learn about jobs. Parents work together to build a school/community skating rink, and to bring a ski program to the children without using tax dollars. Two hundred people show up for each school concert held in the local church. If there is no longer a school here, young families like ours will move away from the small towns— and, perhaps, out of state, looking for a more favorable rural experience. My husband and I believe deeply in education. I was educated in public schools in Vermont, where I received an excellent education that gave me the opportunity to pursue higher education at Dartmouth College and the University of Oxford I returned to Vermont because I care about this state and the children in it. I want to teach here, and to help children in Vermont achieve success in their education and beyond. But my husband and I also care about our own children. We do not want our young girls to ride long distances and long hours on school buses to other communities; we want them to grow up with a sense of place and a sense of the community to which they belong.

“These towns may be small, but they are alive, and they are a strong part of the soul of this state.”

As a school board member in Peacham, and as a citizen here for twelve years, I have seen our school budget overwhelmingly supported by a large majority year after year in our town meetings. People of all ages stand up to say how much they care about this part of our community, and how much they care that our very youngest citizens both understand that they are a part of Peacham and that they have access to advantages and opportunities right here that will help them to be successful contributors in the world. We believe in raising our young people to be citizens of our town, because we believe that in turn that will give them the grounding that will enable them to be active, contributing citizens of our state and eventually of the world. ...

As you do the important work of shoring up Vermont's financial future, please keep in mind the young citizens who will stand to benefit from your actions. Please keep in mind the students who live in even the smallest towns and communities. These towns may be small, but they are alive, and they are a strong part of the soul of this state. When their schools go, and the young and educated people move away in search of better opportunities, this important part of Vermont will disappear.

Thanks very much for taking the time to read this.

Sincerely,
Peacham School Board members

Stowe, Vermont School District Board of Directors

Stowe School District Board of Directors, Resolution and Commentary

Don't fix what's not broken: Commentary, Stowe Reporter, April 2, 2015

This week, the Vermont House of Representatives is scheduled to continue discussion of H.361, an education reform bill with significant changes in education funding, spending and governance. While the bill still has many steps before becoming law, the Stowe School Board has adopted resolutions addressing our concerns with two specific provisions of this legislation — mandatory governance consolidation and spending caps.

As the bill appears to have momentum, our intent with these resolutions is to be sure our voice is heard in Montpelier, and that we are proactively representing the best interests of Stowe students and taxpayers.

H.361 attempts to address statewide trends in education that are concerning to all of us. Declines in enrollment statewide, increasing costs, and rising property taxes are taking their toll on Vermont's education system.

At issue is a loss of local control. The bill expresses legislative preference to require governance consolidation — meaning one school board making decisions for a larger “Integrated Education System.” There is too much uncertainty around when and how a waiver would be granted.

We have asked our legislators to adopt language that would clarify a waiver process for districts operating pre-K through grade 12 school systems that objectively meet education policy objectives. As written, the legislation does provide for a waiver process, but does not offer specific requirements for existing districts that meet the policy goals of the bill.

The second point we address in our resolutions is the spending caps. Again, the issue here is local decision-making. Spending caps do not take into account the complexity and variability of local budgets, and would further erode local decision-making by negating voters' ability to approve a local budget.

Under the stable leadership of the Lamoille South Supervisory Union, Stowe has worked with Morristown and Elmore to find efficiencies and opportunities for collaboration that benefits both students and taxpayers in our communities. We feel that what we have is working, as evidenced by strong academic achievement, high levels of parental and community involvement, higher than average student-to-teacher ratios, and per-pupil spending below statewide averages. Existing pre-K through grade 12 education systems that meet the education policy goals should be preserved, including those benefiting from increased enrollment.

We will continue to monitor this legislation as it moves to the Senate Education and Finance committees, and to offer testimony in Montpelier.

http://www.stowetoday.com/stowe_reporter/opinion/opinion_columns/don-t-fix-what-s-not-broken/article_f27b227a-d962-11e4-b2cd-eff2e229785e.html

Stowe School District Resolutions regarding H.361

The Stowe School District Board of Directors supports the alignment of pre-kindergarten to grade 12 school districts. Stowe's school children, together with the

community of Stowe, have experienced firsthand the benefits associated with a high-quality, cost-effective pre-K to grade 12 education system.

The Board of Directors supports affordable, transparent and accountable education systems and governance structures, and agrees with all of the education policy goals of H.361 which increase equity in the quality, variety and delivery of educational opportunities available to students; operate cost-efficiently; equitably manage and deploy resources; share best practices and continually strive to improve student performance; and foster stronger relationships between schools and the community through stable school leadership and opportunities for community engagement.

We also believe that there are pre-K to grade 12 school districts and supervisory unions that already meet the beneficial policy objectives of H.361 and should be preserved, and we therefore oppose any legislation that would eliminate or change those educational governance structures and erode local control of those highly functional education systems.

Further, the Stowe School District Board of Directors recognizes that, while the local effects of Acts 60 and 68 are challenging for the community of Stowe, the state of Vermont has significantly improved equity of statewide access to revenue for public education. And yet, the expanded access to revenue has not, in all cases, led to equity in local education expenditures across Vermont for numerous, unintentional reasons. Not all students in Vermont are well served. The consequences of these shortcomings affect us all.

While we agree that specific measures can and should be taken to provide greater equity in local education spending, we also oppose any legislation that would impose inequitable and harmful caps on local education spending.

Compiled by Vermonters for Schools and Community (V4SC) www.vtschoolsrock.org. These viewpoints are compiled for informational purposes and may not necessarily represent the views of V4SC.