

Chris Tormey

Cabot School Board

Testimony to Senate Finance Committee 5/1/15

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. It's a busy time of year- we appreciate it.

I'm Chris Tormey. I live in Cabot and serve on the School Board there. I'm also the chair of a group called Vermonters for Schools and Communities.

Our reason for speaking with you this afternoon is to voice our concern about the potential impacts of the school consolidation bill that you are considering this week, and to suggest an alternate route to sustain and improve the quality of our schools.

I'd like to introduce the other people besides myself who will be testifying today:

Morgan MacIver is a senior at Twinfield Union School in Marshfield, and is a student member of the Vermont State Board of Education. Marty Strange is a resident of Randolph and a member of the steering committee of V4S&C, and Peter Moscovites is a resident of Charleston and is a member of the North Country Union High School Board.

My own concerns with this bill stem from my experience as a teacher, parent, and school board member. I have taught biology and earth science at Lamoille Union High School in Hyde Park for the past twenty-five years. My wife and I have three grown sons, all of whom graduated from Cabot High School.

Lamoille Union where I teach has about 140 students in each grade and draws from six surrounding towns. In contrast, my sons were educated in a school with between 15 to 25 students in a grade that come mainly from Cabot, with a few tuition students each year from neighboring towns.

I know from firsthand experience that small schools like Cabot High School are able to provide their students with a strong academic foundation. In addition they can, because of their small size, involve students in a range of activities that develop skills in leadership, creativity, collaboration and planning at a level of

student participation that's much higher than is generally possible at much larger schools.

As an example, many high schools across Vermont have sought to challenge their students by offering "Advanced Placement" courses, in which students strive to earn college credit after completing rigorous course work. Across Vermont in 2014, 12% of 11th- and 12th-graders took an AP exam for college credit in either math or science. At Cabot in the same year, 38% of juniors and seniors took AP Biology, and fully two-thirds of them passed the exam and received college credit.

Other electives also enjoy high rates of participation at Cabot. Approximately 40% of high school students learn a foreign language and over 50% participate in a varsity sport. Between 30% and 40% of students are involved in band and/or chorus, and the band last year composed a number of songs and went on tour as "the Limes", and eventually recorded a CD. Each year the entire high school (all of the students) organize and perform in a large musical production. Students are involved in everything from building sets and working out lighting to acting, singing, or accompanying with an instrument. These performances take place in the school's CSPAC building (which students and community members helped to build several years ago) and are quite extraordinary in their scope and talent.

Cabot encourages its students to develop and complete projects that build important skills and also connect to the community. Students in a biology class learned about water quality and stream erosion while working with a scientist to design and build a new access to the Winooski River. An unused classroom was converted into a school café by a group of students who learned business and marketing skills in the process. Many of the school's courses require students to perform in-depth research and then present their results to the community.

In summary, small schools like Cabot's can provide an excellent education for a broad range of students. Not despite of, but because of their small size, they are an important, successful and often innovative part of our state's education system. I think it's unwise to craft legislation that would make it difficult for many of those schools to stay open.

Across Vermont, fully 1/3 of our schools currently receive a Small Schools Grant; these grants totaled 7.3 million dollars last year. Although that figure represents

just 0.5% of the state's overall education expenses, these grants are vital for the schools that receive them. At Cabot, for example, our grant represents the equivalent of two teaching positions. If that grant gets phased out, we would have to choose between eliminating those positions or significantly increasing the local property tax rate. The continued success (and existence) of Cabot and many other small schools will be jeopardized if those funds are cut.

As this legislation has been crafted this year, a lot has been said about saving money and increasing opportunities for our students. It seems now that there may be very limited savings- that should not be surprising, given that 90% of Vermont students are not in the small schools now receiving grants, and which would be forced to consolidate under the draft bill.

So what's left is the question of quality, and the perception that small schools cannot effectively educate our kids. That perception is inaccurate: during the past decade graduates of Cabot School have gone on to continue their education at colleges like St. Michael's, UVM, Middlebury College, and Harvard. A number of those students came from families with no previous experience with education beyond high school, and many gained the skills and self-confidence to succeed precisely because of the small-school education and support they received at Cabot School. I will include with our testimony a letter from Kate Westdijk, a recent graduate of Cabot, discussing the value of the education she received there.

I hope that this committee will not move forward with this bill to mandate consolidation of Vermont schools. I think that despite the short-term incentives, the combination of the removal of the current supports for small schools and their forced merger into larger districts will in several years lead to the closure of a number of schools now doing an excellent job.

I know that the drive this year has been to "bend the cost curve" of education spending, and to improve the opportunities available to students. The problem is that we haven't yet taken the time to look carefully at schools (large and small) across the state to see what kind of opportunities and education they are providing for kids now, and yet we're considering a massive reorganization plan that will seriously impact one-third of them.

I would suggest that rather than spend valuable state funds on incentives and transition funds for forced consolidations that may or may not yield positive results (either educational or fiscal) that we spend them instead on providing the support needed for the Vermont Agency of Education to use the Educational Quality Standards approved last year to seriously examine how well all of our schools are doing. That system is designed to identify strengths and challenges, and to help schools improve. While that work is being done, we should continue to support schools with programs like the Small Schools Grants.

I'm suggesting that we not dismantle the system we have until we have a clear idea of the parts of it worth keeping. I'm afraid that we might lose a lot that's quite valuable, if we break it down before we find that out.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon as you deliberate on this bill.