

School Choice Offers Flexibility to Vermont's Education System

The saying 'You don't know how good you had it until you lose it' could directly apply to the small rural town of Elmore, Vt., population of about 850 which still operates the state's last one-room school house for grades 1-3 and designated a Superior School. The simple unassuming building is well-maintained and efficient. The cost to educate per student is \$8700 which is reasonable. The school has been the heart of the community for years.

But, Elmore had something even more special than its school - it had school choice for all students in grades 7-12. School choice has been a primary reason why young families have chosen to live in Elmore for years. True school choice has given Elmore families of every economic background the ability to get their children into the right learning situation where they can thrive academically and emotionally and, sometimes, it takes more than one school move to find the right fit - thus flexibility. School choice makes parents more responsible and keeps them more directly involved in their children's education. I can say this because all three of my children participated in school choice. The decision required us to provide transportation and to pay the additional tuition not covered by the allowed state voucher amount. Would we do it again - absolutely.

On December 28, 2015, Elmore lost its school choice through a merger 'revote' - consolidation of Morristown and Elmore. The revote was jammed through by the LSSU administration which used the time-worn ploy of 'it will lower property taxes' to gain the support of retirees in Elmore. Disputes between retirees (primarily pro- merger) and young families (primarily anti-merger) became heated. Retirees have openly said they do not want Elmore property sold to young families. Some of the retirees have lived in Elmore for a number of years, raising their children here and using school choice for their children but not wanting to extend that privilege to other families - this is seen as being selfish and elitist by most anti-merger residents. Thus the division continues and grows in our small community.

From the beginning of merger meetings, the LSSU provided exaggerated savings figures that would be realized through the merger. The two school boards Morristown and Elmore supported the LSSU figures as they had not done any research on the figures. It became the burden of Elmore residents to question and research figures - forcing the savings figures to be lowered twice and then the final amount was questionable. Elmore and Morristown residents were told at a pre-merger informational meeting that there would not be a need to expand Morristown classrooms to accommodate Elmore students. After the revote passed the merger, Elmore residents learned that the LSSU and Morristown school board had sought and paid for professional design services for classroom expansions and a new gym building prior to any merger discussions between the two towns - this information was never disclosed before the original merger vote. The bond vote on these capital improvements and a new gym will be this May. Elmore does not have the voters to overcome a 'yes' vote from Morristown on any bond issue - we inherit the debt and most likely a tax increase.

So do Elmore residents who wanted to keep school choice support Act 46 (we were merged under 153/156)? No. Do we feel that the real purpose of Act 46 is to end school choice in Vermont? Yes. Why would any legislator honestly believe that this law promotes equality and quality in education - it is destroying our small VT communities and will close our small rural schools. School choice is an important part of our unique Vermont heritage. Vermont is where it

began in 1869. The school choice movement is gaining momentum across the United States. The Vermont voucher system provides 150 years of school choice success - the legislature should be looking for ways to expand school choice, not limit choice or end it through Act 46. President Calvin Coolidge, a simple man from the small, rural community and school of Plymouth, Vermont, attended one of Vermont's finest examples of a 'voucher school', St Johnsbury Academy. This says it all about the success of school choice in Vermont.

Please take the time to go online and look at the documentary film - 'The Elmore Experience' to be able to understand what the merger/consolidation experience has been in our community.

Respectfully submitted by

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