

Testimony from Thomas Lovett, Headmaster of St. Johnsbury Academy

This afternoon I'd like to cover five topics:

- An overview of SJA—whom we serve, what we offer, and how we are funded—all in support of our mission
- The value of independence in allowing us to successfully live out our mission
- Our concerns regarding the SBE proposed changes to existing rules for independent school approval
- Our concerns regarding the process the SBE has undertaken in proposing these rule changes
- And our concerns about the data that has been presented regarding independent schools in general and SJA in particular

The mission of SJA is to teach good character, to foster a love of learning, and to encourage each individual to understand his or her relationships, rights, and responsibilities within a community that is itself part of a larger community. Our core values include diversity, independence, tradition, a deep optimism regarding young people, and a commitment to excellence.

We currently serve 694 day students from over 40 towns from Vermont and northern NH and 255 boarders from 24 countries and 17 states. We offer a comprehensive curriculum spanning over 230 courses in 13 departments. We offer over 20 AP courses, over a dozen dual enrollment courses, over 40 fine and performing arts courses, and as the regional technical center, over 30 career and technical education classes. We run our own restaurant; we have pre-professional programs in biomedical, engineering, and natural resource management; and our Capstone program has been used as a model by the College Board. This richness is the result of our commitment to comprehensive programming so that each student finds something he or she loves to learn, and it has arisen from our ability to innovate and meet student needs and interests as they arise.

We also offer a full range of health services with three full-time nurses, two full-time mental health counselors, and several outside counselors who come in on a contracted basis. We have multiple levels of academic support: a Learning Center that provides free tutoring from full-time professional teachers available for free; a Study Skills program that provides learning support and strategies as well as homework support, also for free; a Guided Studies program for students on IEPs or on learning plans designed for unilaterally placed students, and an Individualized Services Program that serves students functioning below the fifth-grade level.

I'd like to stop here for a moment to address some of the data that has been presented to the Committee recently. You have been told that 7% of our publicly funded students are on IEPs, and somehow that is meant to imply that we are not taking students with significant learning needs. That implied accusation is untrue. As mentioned above, our multi-tiered system of support has been very successful in helping students get the support they need without being in special education programs. In fact, our 7% is very close to the 5% number suggested as a goal by the Vermont Higher Education Collaborative in March 2014. I would also like to note that, in supervisory unions in Caledonia County, there is only one public high school, and that school only has 100 high school students. I wonder where our critics think all of the students on IEPs are going in the NEK. I have the answer: the vast majority are enrolled at independent schools!

Back to how we live out our mission: we have endowed funds that pay for clothing, dental care, eye care, computers (beyond our 1:1 iPad program), internet access, fees, supplies, graphing calculators, and occasionally food for students in poverty; one fund pays for students to travel internationally as part of our study travel program. We offer aspirational and anti-poverty programs, funded entirely out of private funds, that teach entrepreneurship, financial management, leadership, and communication while students run a manufacturing program and a culinary program during the summer. We run another program for a week for those students who find transitioning to high school difficult, also paid for by private funds.

I'd like to address at this point, the other misleading data that you have seen recently regarding students qualifying for free and reduced lunch at independent schools in general and SJA in particular. All but 100 students in the NEK go to an independent school for high school, so virtually all students who qualify for FRL go to an independent school. At SJA, 42% of publicly funded Vermont students are FRL. I would caution us against relying on oversimplification of data. As corroborated by economist Art Woolf, several factors make high schools rates lower than elementary school rates—as children age, parents are more likely to become two-wage families; as children age, parents are more likely to be longer-tenured in their jobs and therefore make more money, and finally, some families no longer want to fill out the FRL paperwork once students reach high school. The more of these factors that are active in a community, the greater the disparity between percentages. Before making judgments or inferences based on a simplistic set of data, I encourage the Committee to dive more deeply into this issue if it is a real concern.

Again, back to our mission: we are able to fund all we do because we raise hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in private funds. Some of that comes from ancillary programs, some comes from endowment income, some from fundraising efforts. In fact, over half of our \$30 million budget comes from private funding, including private tuitions. That generosity and privately raised revenue allows us to keep our tuition low—below the state average—while providing thousands of dollars of increased benefits and services to our publicly funded students. It also allows us to be an active partner in the local economy. In 2012, economist Art Woolf calculated that the Academy employed 283 workers, one out of every twenty workers in the Town of St. Johnsbury; paid \$11.2 million in wages, one dollar out of every twenty dollars earned in the Town; generated more than \$12 million in export earnings for the local economy; and had a multiplier effect that leads to an additional 135 jobs and an additional \$4.9 million of income in Caledonia County. Seeing as that was five years ago, today's numbers would be much higher. When Art did his study, we had just taken over running the town's recreation department which serves the whole region, and we had not yet begun to manage the town's only fitness center, both of which we fund privately.

We could not successfully live out this mission—we could not be as innovative, comprehensive, responsive, generous, or adaptable—if we were not independent. Our independence has also made us more stable in leadership, as we are governed by an independent Board of Trustees, and it has made us more nimble in following our mission.

That's why we are so concerned with the currently proposed revisions to the rules for approving independent schools. To be clear, SJA already complies with many of the proposed changes—we are approved in all special education categories, we accept all students except those who are a danger to themselves or others, we are accredited, we do annual audits. However, again to be clear, we find these proposed rule changes to be drastic and have significant concerns about two of the proposals in particular. The first is one that would require independent schools seeking approval to comply with all

state and federal laws and regulations required of public schools. We would not comply with this rule, as we do not have licensed teachers (I do not have a license) and do not believe that requiring teaching licenses would make our faculty better. We are also concerned with the open enrollment provisions. I have heard that the VSBA and others are proposing a lottery system. Imagine this scene: a family moves from Maryland to St. Johnsbury for the explicit reason that they want their children to go to the Academy. Imagine that the move required some sacrifice and they had to become a one-car family so they buy a home within walking distance. This scenario and others like it happen regularly. It's the kind of phenomena that many of us believe could make school choice an economic driver in Vermont. Now imagine that we have to set a number of "publicly funded slots" by April 15—before our boarding enrollment is set (often not stable until after Labor Day) and so artificially set at 750 students. Imagine 800 apply, and the lottery rule is enforced, and the students whose family sacrificed to send their children to the Academy, who live down the block, are denied access. The current rules already protect against discrimination and leave us enough flexibility to adapt to changing enrollment conditions. There is no need to add this onerous and potentially damaging rule.

And this brings me to my final points. These proposed rules—adopted by the SBE in late July without any stakeholder input—show little or no understanding of independent schools or the impacts these rules would have on those schools, especially the smaller ones. While I appreciate the steps the SBE has made after meeting with ICAR to try and garner more stakeholder input, and our private discussions have tested the boundaries of various stakeholders, I remain concerned that a solution has been identified before the problem. The current rules work, we have seen no evidence that they do not work, and we don't think the revisions are needed.

Furthermore, it has become clear that the SBE is not familiar with its existing rules governing independent schools and is not unified in understanding what the proposed rules actually say and do. It is also clear that the SBE does not understand and appreciate the power and value of mission-based education. Therefore, if the SBE is to have regulatory oversight of independent schools, it needs to have balanced representation, adding voices that understand and can speak to the value of independent schools to the Board. Vermont education is built upon three types of schooling—public, independent, and home schooling—and the SBE membership should reflect that fact.

I believe there are real challenges facing us as Vermont educators, and I believe that the demands of a 21st century education require collaboration and communication in more private-public partnerships like the one SJA is exploring with Danville High School. These rules and the current bent of the SBE preclude that kind of creativity and collaboration. I'd like to see us work together to tackle the challenges of the achievement gap, the effects of poverty and addiction, the cost of education, and the preparation of our students to be active, informed, moral, and fully employed citizens in the world and in the world's greatest democracy.