

In a follow-up to Tom Lovett's *Caledonian Record* article last week and in preparation for the State Board of Education (SBE) public forum to be held at St. Johnsbury Academy this week, I also wanted to express my concerns about the proposed rule changes and encourage those who support school choice and independent schools to turn out and let your voices be heard.

Like Headmaster Lovett I, too, am concerned about the loss of the very thing which makes us great: our independence. Requiring Lyndon Institute—or any independent school in Vermont—to follow all state and federal laws and regulations that apply to public schools will have an adverse effect on our students, our parents, our employees, and our communities.

I can say unequivocally that the educational success and partnerships that Lyndon Institute has created over the past 150 years are due to our independent, yet community-minded spirit, and we have creatively used our resources and our autonomy to expand opportunities for students in an efficient and effective manner to serve our population. Additionally, with the diverse public and independent school market in our region, students can and do choose the offering that best meets their needs and interests. I could not, in good conscience, support rules that challenge this and allow our students and our valued community partnerships to be adversely affected.

It has been stated that these rule changes are borne to address a civil rights' issue and they are intended to protect students. I offer that the independent schools in Vermont are already a shining example of what we want our educational system to be, and are based on two core principles—equity and excellence. When I look at the numbers, I do not see the data to support the claim that there is a civil rights issue at play in relation to our current construct. However, there will be one on our hands should the changes take place. Allow me to explain.

According to figures from the Agency of Education, in the fall of 2015, there were 2,589 students in New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accredited independent schools in Vermont utilizing public funds and 123 students enrolled in State Board of Education approved schools. These numbers refer specifically to students attending schools with a broad program, not a specialized or therapeutic special education school. This means that 2,712 students attended a Vermont independent school on public dollars. Of that number, 2099 of those students attended an independent school that is approved in all 12 categories of special education, and 2,347 attended independent schools approved in at least three categories of special education. These “three categories” are important because approximately 80% of special education students in Vermont fall into one of those categories. Understanding that, let me repeat the numbers: 2,347 of 2,712 students utilizing public dollars attend Vermont independent schools that provide special education services. Of those 365 remaining students, at least 102 of them attend independent schools locally that, while not formally approved by the state, offer specialized instruction to students of all learning abilities.

Further, you have heard in the past, and are likely to hear from parents at the public forum, stories related to their decision to bypass the special education services at a public school in order to receive the specialized instruction at an independent school—and with great success.

The rest of those students, supported by public dollars, attend other Vermont independent schools with a different philosophy but the same outcome—they benefit from a mission-driven, personalized and caring learning environment that focuses on the needs of the individual student. Understanding these numbers and realities it is clear to see that there is no issue.

On another front, however, these rule changes will create a civil rights' issue. Should these rule changes take place, they would put some independent schools out of business, possibly some within our very own community. Not because there wasn't a market demand for them or because they were not serving their populations well, but because onerous rules crippled their budgets and/or forced them to no longer accept public dollars. And which group will be disproportionately affected by such events? Our financially disadvantaged students. Families with financial means always have a choice. However, for those of lesser means, the families' choice is dictated by where they live. And while they may be more than adequately served, the point to consider is that they have no ability to choose.

Finally, research shows us that independent schools are often more diverse than public schools, providing students with varied economic means access to an outstanding educational experience. I hope that we think about the unintended consequences that the proposed rule changes will have on schools, taxpayers, communities and, most importantly, students who need and deserve our assistance to find success in school and life. The State Board of Education will host a public forum to allow the public to learn more and comment on the proposed rule changes on Tuesday, December 6th at 6:00 PM. The forum will be held at St. Johnsbury Academy in Fuller Hall. I hope that many of you will be able to join us to discuss these and other important points of consideration.

Sincerely,
Daren Houck
Headmaster, Lyndon Institute