

Chair Webb and members of the House Education Committee:

I applaud your work to advance H.106, to encourage community schools. I listened in on Wednesday as you heard from Mike Francis et.al. to consider amendments to the bill.

H.106 is a good bill. Community schools are the future of Vermont education. By way of background, I was there as Lt. Gov. to do my small part to help establish the Molly Stark Elementary School community school program in the late 1990s. What made it work was the leadership, imagination, and dogged determination of Sue Maguire, the principal. I have been a proponent ever since.

I have four comments and concerns that I ask you to consider:

1. H.106 should be funded by the General Fund, not the Education Fund.

--The bill is rightly focused on children growing up in poverty. It reads like a human services bill. Many of the services anticipated to be included in community schools are those provided and funded by the Agency of Human Services. All this to help kids who have grown up in poverty to overcome the barriers too often encountered in their birth to five lives. The costs of the lasting impacts of poverty on our children have too long devolved to our schools and the property taxes that support them. H.106 is an opportunity to recognize that the General Fund should pay for human services and the Education Fund should pay for education costs.

--The bill is an implicit acknowledgement that the so-called opportunity gap, or achievement gap, is largely a function of poverty. Our school districts and property taxpayers should not be responsible for the increasing costs of inequality and poverty.

--Property tax increases are driving taxpayers to push school boards to constrain spending. As newly unified school districts respond, there is a move to close small schools. Those schools are often the centers of their communities. Using the property tax funded Education Fund for H.106 would be another tap on the hammer on the nails of the coffin of rural, small town community schools. How ironic it would be if a bill that would help a few schools would contribute, in its own way, to the demise of dozens of small schools.

--Too many human services costs have already been shifted from the General Fund to the Education Fund. (This could be an interesting post-crossover conversation for the committee.)

--While schools should realize savings in the long run from community schools, the General Fund will accrue even greater savings from a reduction in costs for the human services provided in community schools.

--It is true that any local costs associated with this bill will be as a result of voluntary local choice, but the additional property tax costs will be involuntarily borne by all of the state's property taxpayers.

2. In light of the above comments, you might target any grants to those small schools that have been targeted or could be in danger of closing. H.106, if passed in its current version, is more likely to be helpful to those schools that already have some of the resources needed to receive a grant.

3. The Agency of Human Services should be involved formally in the technical assistance provided by the Agency of Education.

--Many of services anticipated to be provided in community schools are AHS services.

--There is a tremendous opportunity here to implement a system of the state renting space in our underpopulated schools to meet with 3Squares and Reach Up and other recipients. Our parent-child centers could rent space for early childhood programs and meetings with families. (At the same time, why not DMV once-a-week offices in schools to renew licenses and registrations?) A little imagination could lead H.106's community schools to be truly community centers, with some of the overhead costs borne by other services and programs.

4. A small but important point. It is unlikely the Agency of Education has the staff capacity to fully embrace the challenges of H.106. Add a position. As a former Secretary of AHS, I know that all too often the legislature adds responsibilities without the resources to accomplish their goals. The Agency of Education is especially challenged to meet its responsibilities within current staffing levels. The successful implementation of H.106 will require a fulltime staff position. (The Secretary is likely constrained by the 5th floor from mentioning this.) Please give it to them.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to testify to expand on any of my comments.

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