

## **Why Do Vermonters Care So Much About School Governance?**

With Vermont schools stressed by Covid, you might expect pandemic recovery to be the only issue on the minds of those working in education. However, over the past two years a number of Vermont towns have been working diligently on another project: to withdraw from or dissolve their merged school districts formed under Vermont's controversial 2015 law, Act 46.

Halifax and Readsboro started the ball rolling when the State Board of Education agreed to their request to dissolve their merger in September, 2020. Since then, Athens, Grafton, and Westminster dissolved their merger, returning to the system of electing town school boards. Stowe has withdrawn from their merger and now awaits a supervisory union assignment from the state. Lincoln voted overwhelmingly to leave its merger, and Starksboro is beginning this process with a vote this Town Meeting Day. Meanwhile, with the organizing theme "Brave Little Town," Ripton also withdrew from their consolidated district and was given grudging state approval to establish its own school district.

Why do communities feel compelled to wrangle with this now? Simply put, because these mergers have not fulfilled Act 46's goals. Financial savings have not materialized; costs have instead risen. Equity has not been achieved; rather inequities have become more apparent. Small schools have not been supported; instead, larger structures have actively worked to eliminate small schools altogether.

In these towns, this issue touches a nerve and stirs a passion. A powerful mix of responsibility to their children's educations, commitment to community, and defense of democratic values motivates individuals to act. Here, not only were promises of merger dashed, but in many cases, carefully crafted articles of agreement protecting small schools have been disregarded. As one Starksboro citizen recently testified, the actions of the unified district "have resulted in a broken relationship between the community and the District."

Long-standing Vermont law recognizes the role of local democracy in school governance. Voters can petition to vote on dissolution or withdrawal from districts. Towns then vote on this issue, and neighboring towns in the merger also cast their ballots. When voters in Salisbury, Middlebury, Bridport, Weybridge, and Cornwall approved Ripton's withdrawal, they were recognizing that Ripton had won the right to be free from a merger that would close its school and bus its young children up and down a mountain.

No community makes these decisions lightly. They can't. Under laws passed in the early 1960s, withdrawal or dissolution necessitates hours and hours of volunteer organizing, research, petitioning, and in-depth community deliberation about schooling and costs. Ultimately some towns continue toward withdrawal or dissolution, while others instead recommit to merger. The decision is made via the ballot box—twice—once in the town and again in the merged unit. All this is a healthy part of Vermont democracy.

This long-standing process stands in stark contrast to the more recent Act 46, which allowed the unelected State Board of Education to force-merge school districts against the express wishes of

the electorate. Some of the mergers currently being undone were created by force; others, tellingly, were created voluntarily and the dissolution is due to dissatisfaction with the outcome.

Rather than heed communities' concerns, the State Board of Education is [doubling down](#). The House Education Committee recently took up the State Board's recommendation to alter the law yet again, to make it even more difficult to dissolve or withdraw. Noted State Board Chair Oliver Olsen, "We don't want another Ripton."

Actually, we should. Ripton's passion for educational excellence, community engagement, and commitment to democracy are models more of us should emulate. The role of the State should be to set and maintain standards on educational quality, equity, value, and other key priorities. It should be to support, not thwart, the wishes of the electorate. Every Vermont community is different, and decisions about merger and withdrawal are deeply dependent on each town's situation. Each must be allowed to determine the structure that best meets its students' needs and the state's goals.

The value of children attending school in their home community may be difficult to quantify, but make no doubt: to these townspeople it is invaluable. Research proves that students experience better outcomes when family and community are involved in the schools. For many, these schools are the beating heart of the town, where generations of neighbors from diverse backgrounds have built a shared sense of meaning. Small schools can better ensure that students from impoverished families get the attention they need. Investing in a local school is likely to attract families, whereas school closure signals property-value suicide.

Instead of doubling down on efforts to close small schools, the state board should be partnering to facilitate the wishes of the electorate by placing these towns in supervisory unions where they can thrive. Vermont needs vibrant communities, and the state should be supporting rural Vermont by investigating all options for creative revitalization.

One size won't fit all—that's why local democratic engagement is so crucial to identifying solutions. At a time when citizens' faith in democracy is on the ropes, the state should not deliver another gut punch.

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