

Testimony for Senate Education Committee re: bill H.727, April 12,2022
Laureen Cox, Ripton, VT

Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for the work you all do to support our state and its people. My name is Laureen Cox. I worked as an elementary school counselor for 34 years and have been on the Ripton Selectboard for about the same length of time. I currently serve as the board chair. I am also a parent.

I want to testify about the section in bill H.727 pertaining to a school withdrawing from a consolidated school district. Ripton has already passed this obstacle, and having done so, I believe we have some real perspective on the process. First, I would like to make a few things clear. Ripton is a very demographically diverse town, without the sorts of stratified neighborhoods one might find in a larger community, It is truly a “we’re all in this together” kind of place, probably from being in the mountains and geographically separate from the valley communities with which we otherwise link. When we made our bid to keep our elementary school open in our town, it was not to maintain some kind of elite separatism. It was also not to sacrifice our children and their educational opportunities in order to boost our local economy or even for some higher democratic principle, although both are worthy of consideration. We bonded for and built our school in the late ‘80’s, at a time when few communities were taking on such projects. We did it because our student population was growing and we knew it was the right thing to do. From the time we opened our current school in 1989 until consolidation, Ripton Elementary School students’ academic achievement scores were consistently high. That is important, but even more important is the way that children growing up in a small community can be embraced by that community, as can their families. This has the effect of building their emotional and social intelligence, attributes that help them become successful, productive, participating citizens. It has proved evident in a vast number of Ripton Elementary School graduates, no matter their personal background.

I worked primarily in a large elementary school and I am fully aware of the helpful services and supports that can be available in a larger setting, but small schools can offer their own set of supports, which are often far more community-based. Over the years, I have seen students thrive in Ripton who would have been lost in a larger school, and I have seen a level of involvement by parents and families that will not exist when students are bused to distant communities. There is strong research that links families’ school connection with student success

As you contemplate this section on withdrawal, know that what a town needs to do to get to the point of withdrawal under existing law is already complicated. When it became evident that our school was in line to be closed, in spite of being one of the best facilities in the district, albeit the smallest, we reached out to the school board. We made suggestions, asked for meetings, and worked hard to be involved in the decision-making process. We were essentially brushed off, and so attempted to make two changes in the charter to allow any of the district towns a greater voice in the process. After getting well over the required number of signatures on the petition

from all six towns in the district to bring these changes to the voters, the school board chose to not act on the petition. It was at that point that we turned to the withdrawal process. First it took a lot of work to make sure all the people in our town understood the issues, the pros and cons, before they voted. This could never have happened if a significant number of people in the community were not already aware, concerned, and involved. Although the vote in Ripton happened as a singleton election in January, 2021, the turn out was as high or higher than that of a typical Town Meeting election. It then was necessary to get information out to voters in all the other towns in our school district, in spite of the pandemic. Their vote to allow Ripton's withdrawal took place on Town Meeting day and passed by the vast majority. None of this could have happened without a lot of hard work, a lot of information to the voters, and a strong support from the local community. If Ripton's people had not already valued their school and their children highly, it never would have gotten off the ground.

Many of you are from larger communities and may never have experienced the real sense of community that can happen in a small town. I certainly never had prior to our buying our home in Ripton. You may think of equity and opportunity meaning large schools where everyone has, on paper, identical access to services, activities, opportunities. Those things have a place, but are not always actually equitable. If an afterschool activity is not linked with a bus ride home, how can a student from a more distant town be involved? If some children spend two hours or more every day on a bus while others can walk, ride their bikes, or have relatively short bus rides, how is that equitable? If a parent needs to come to a conference or performance at their child's school, but they lack the vehicle, the gas money, the emotional comfort, or the time to travel to a school that is several miles away, how is that equitable? There needs to be a way for towns to have a voice in what will actually be successful for their children and their families.

Making the opportunity for withdrawal so complex and the process and decision-making so far removed from those most impacted is not a positive development. The only real snag that showed itself as we went through the process is the fact that there is no stated time between a town's vote to withdraw and the other district towns scheduling their vote, something they have to coordinate so as to vote on the same day. I would suggest that that vote needs to take place not less than 60 nor more than 90 days after they have received notice from the Secretary of State that the initial withdrawal vote has taken place. I also think, although it already exists in law, that the State Board of Education must direct a Supervisory Union to take on the now independent district unless they can clearly state why they believe the district is large enough to not need such an "umbrella". This should be true whether or not that Supervisory Union wants to take on the school.

Education is crucial to the present and the future of our state for many, many reasons. Where communities value their children and their education, they will support their schools. The more connection, the more support. Removing the opportunity for connection leads us down a path that will be detrimental not only to our children but to all of us.

Thank you again for this opportunity to weigh in, and I am happy to answer any questions.

