

Millard Cox: Statement to the Vermont Senate Education Committee

Thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding bill H.727. And thank you all for the work you do for the People and the State of Vermont.

My name is Millard Cox, and I live in the Town of Ripton. I am a retired public educator. I have been an educator for 35 years, 26 of those years as a special educator at Middlebury Union High School.

First of all, let me say that it is clear to me that the purpose of the sections of H.727 beginning on page 80 and continuing for 18 pages is to do away with Vermont Statute 16 V.S.A.724, the legal means by which Ripton Town, and now Lincoln Town, have separated from their respective union districts. And doing away with the current statute 16 V.S.A.724, will make any further secessions by towns from union districts unlikely, if not impossible.

I want you to understand that I see this language in H.727 as oppression. It is oppression because its purpose is to restrict voting rights and close off the democratic process by which people in this state can achieve self-determination and pursue the positive goals that will improve their lives. The process that is described in this bill puts me in mind of the bureaucratic systems established by authoritarian regimes, where government agents claim to be in office to help the people improve their lives. Instead, they incapacitate the people and remove the means by which they seek improvement and self-sufficiency. Using bureaucratic process and procedural red tape, they block the efforts of the people. The bureaucratic process and procedural red-tape laid out in these sections of H.727 is not only a means of oppression, it is discriminatory. It is deliberately targeted at Vermonters who live in small towns, especially those who live in small towns who have small schools which they want to preserve, to keep operating and vibrant. I never imagined that I would see this kind of repression and injustice and discrimination written into a bill in the Vermont legislature. If enacted, this law will generate cynicism and distrust in coming years not only toward this legislative body, but also toward the Vermont Agency of Education and the Vermont State School Board.

We in Ripton built our elementary school in 1989. We paid off the bond in 20 years. Our town supported the Ripton school budget for 26 consecutive years. Our school was consistently one of the most successful schools in the District during those years, according to test scores. We in Ripton had never considered our school to be a problem and certainly never considered closing it. Ripton Elementary School was, however, considered a problem by the new ACSD School Board, and we were given no option but to allow it to be closed against our will. Our only means of saving our school was to leave the district. We in Ripton have not believed that closing our school and bussing our children to two larger schools with greater classroom numbers and fewer support staff will improve educational opportunities for our children or for the other children in the District. Is there empirical evidence that consolidation will improve equity or student performance or reduce taxes? Are we to assume that small schools are inherently inferior to larger schools? Where is the data supporting that assumption?

And what will we have when the State has finally subverted democratic process and self-determination in the State's small towns? Calvin Coolidge said, "If the spirit of liberty should vanish in other parts of the Union, and support of our institutions should languish, it could all be replenished from the generous store held by the people of this brave little state of Vermont." When the last small town school in Vermont is at last closed, will you have finally found a way to deplete that generous spirit of liberty in Vermont?