



**STATE OF VERMONT**  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

April 4, 2024

To: House Education and House Ways & Means Committees – Joint Hearing

From: Rep. Tristan Roberts

Good morning. My name is Tristan Roberts, and I represent Halifax, Whitingham, and Wilmington.

Our local schools are the topic that my constituents most often want to talk about, and I often tell them, talk to the school board.

I'm grateful to be talking about education at a state level and I want to voice some of the realities from my district.

Plenty of my constituents wouldn't mind seeing our high school close. They have quality concerns. They feel it's shrinking anyway – there used to be two rival baseball teams. Now they're consolidated and can't field one. Which in turn leads to more attrition as the kid for whom playing sports was a motivation to come to school peels off.

Many of my constituents would disagree, but you could make a rational argument that this district with the size of its facilities and its student population should focus on having a great middle school, even merging that with another town, then giving them a choice for high school.

If we closed our high school, some of these kids would be an hour away from Brattleboro Union High School, and that includes going over Route 9 and Hogback in the winter – it can be a hard commute. And while some kids love BUHS, for some it's not always a fit.

For kids in Halifax who have a choice for high school, a lot are happy going to Franklin Tech over in Massachusetts, Northfield Mount Hermon, the Academy at Charlemont, all over in Massachusetts, as well as Grace Christian School in Bennington.

Could closing the high school or looking at merging local middle schools reduce costs and help us focus on meeting kids early and getting them where they need to be? Maybe. Speaking from my Windham-6, I would invite the state to look at consolidation.

**I'd be in favor of a "Blue Ribbon panel," like the federal Commission on Base Realignment and Closures that was chartered in 1988. It could make these hard, strategic choices at the State level, and then, I would urge us to reinvest in local culture.**

When Wilmington consolidated with Whitingham, they built the high school in Whitingham. The old high school in downtown Wilmington was left empty. Today, the Old School is now becoming a great resource for two ends of the population scale. It's a magnet for seniors with pickleball, and a magnet for families with daycare, now expanded thanks to Act 76.

Taxpayers sometimes scratch their heads. The school district walked away from that building because of maintenance costs but then the town picked it up and inch by inch is working to keep up with deferred maintenance. We should be careful about pushing costs into other ledgers.

**We should really look at the lack of public participation in school budgets. Maybe a statewide school district would help—if that's where we can gather the expertise and public input required by school budgeting.**

A lot of my constituents are aging out of their homes. They know that sooner or later they can't age in place, but they would love to age in the same town they've lived for their lives. Could we convert the high school to housing, pickleball, and a business incubator in the shop space? There's a bond on it. This is the kind of thing the state could uniquely look at and help finance.

**In terms of paying for it all, let's have the State look at economic development at the town level.** To say, maybe this town's demographics are no longer a fit for having this high school, but they need senior housing and childcare, and there's a local machine shop that's been looking for space and would love to take over the shop building and employ local high school graduates.

As we look at the State on a systems level, let's look at the dead ends in our systems and forge new connections. **On school construction, I'd like to talk more another time about the potential use of standardized, modular but human classroom designs that can be built in Vermont prefab manufacturing facilities, and the potential to control costs, speed up permitting, and create entry-level jobs.**

But as I wrap up, I want to come back to quality. Because again, in the eyes of some constituents, there's not a loyalty to the public school system, either with sending kids there or keeping tax dollars there. I think **we'd be talking less about cost if people were really happy with quality.**

This also hurts us because we can't protect kids from discrimination. I've spoken with constituents for whom they don't mind the money going to schools that discriminate, if

that's a collateral cost of a free-choice system. Isn't that our accepted State policy, if we don't respond to Carson v. Makin?

That's unfortunate, to say the least. It reflects that we're in danger of giving up on our Constitution and on our values. And I also want to be clear, myself and many of my constituents support investing in our public schools. Can we do that, and talk about choice where it makes sense?

I encourage us all to think big about how we can meet kids where they're at and stick with them. In House Corrections & Institutions, I see a lot of people who didn't finish a high school education and are more likely to be illiterate and not prepared for the job market in any way.

You asked for concrete suggestions. In summary, I want to highlight the following points:

1. Support for consolidation via a State Blue Ribbon panel.
2. Couple that with economic development looking at town assets and population.
3. Keep our focus on quality education. On that point, I'm excited about the Legislature's work on BOCES. I benefited from our county-wide BOCES as a public school student in New York State. BOCES gave kids access to specialized teachers and programs, including vocational and gifted and talented programs, that a single rural school would otherwise lack access to.

To quote educational philosopher John Dewey, who was born in Burlington and who spent one year teaching in Charlotte, **"If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."**

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tristan Roberts