

Eric Rhomberg-- testimony to the Vermont Senate Education Committee 4-12-23

My name is Eric Rhomberg, and I am the head of school at the Compass School in Westminster in Windham County. I have serious concerns about H.483 and its potential impact on education in our state and about what I see as a misguided basis for making educational policy.

I have been a high school educator for 35 years, serving as a science teacher in both public and independent schools, an adjunct graduate school professor in science education, and a middle and high school administrator and head of school. I feel inspired working in education, seeing it as one of the most fundamentally important and transformational activities in our community and culture.

I have the pleasure of being a part of the Compass School, a small independent middle and high school which features a caring, close-knit, community-centered, holistic program dedicated to the success of every student. We emphasize hands-on education, integrated projects, a proficiency-based curriculum, assessment by exhibition, connecting with the outside community, social/emotional learning, and a commitment to democracy and restorative practices. Kids come to our school for a variety of reasons: many of them were not succeeding in their previous schools, whether it was due to anxiety and depression, learning differences that weren't being well served, falling through the cracks, or getting bullied and harassed based on their neurodivergence, race, sexual orientation, or identity. Other students and families come to us because they simply prefer the health of our small school community and our active, integrated curriculum. We have a wonderful record of helping students gain the confidence and skills for success in college, work and adult life. Our adult alumni tell us that their experiences at our school were pivotal for their happiness.

We set our tuition at the state approved public tuition average, and about 40% of our students are publicly funded through town choice. The other 60% of our families pay tuition, and we do our best to offer as much need-based financial aid as we can to make our school accessible to all. Over half of our families qualify for free or reduced lunch, and we are approved for and actively serve students with IEP's and 504's. We are nondiscriminatory and actively welcome students who have not been thriving in their previous educational setting. We have a positive relationship with our public school district who treats us as a partner in serving the kids and families in our region.

H.483 and policies like it could crush small independent schools like mine, schools that are extraordinarily valuable parts of our educational ecosystem and worthy of public support. H.483 requires that any approved independent school accepting public tuition must enroll publicly-tuited students without first reviewing their needs, interests or characteristics. Small schools need to be able to collaborate with families and students to ensure the school is a good fit, that the student and family knows about the community they are joining, and the school can ensure they have the resources to serve the kid and create a functioning and effective educational milieu. Small schools are successful where large schools fail for needy students because the education is *personalized*. Schools like Compass use the enrollment process to

determine if we are capable of caring for each student, so that we can continue to care for *every* student. We use the enrollment process to help the student make a new commitment toward their own education. A blind enrollment process is antithetical to our personalized approach which is precisely the unique value we offer to the kids and families who need us most.

H.483 requires an assurance that no public funds are used to subsidize the tuition of private payer students. The objection to "subsidizing" students is inappropriately commodifying them. Education is not a commodity, it is a relationship! At Compass we enroll a community of kids, doing our best to make it accessible to any student who will benefit and succeed in our community. They need each other to succeed. Being in relationship with the community is what the education is all about. This provision just hurts lower income families. We have been activist in squeezing in low income families who desperately need our school. The total revenue of the school goes into staffing and equipping the school to function as an integrated whole. The "town-pay" kids and "non-town-pay" kids all need each other to make a vibrant and diverse community. It can't be separated into dollars "subsidizing" isolated kids. If the legislature intends to reduce discrimination and to serve marginalized kids, this bill could have the exact opposite effect, creating regulatory obstructions to squeeze out the low income kids from our school and other schools like ours.

Recently a prospective student visited my school with her family. She is a young trans woman who is currently schooled online; she needed to leave her large union high school after being bullied to the point of suicide attempts over her non-conformity. At a small community dinner Compass hosted for prospective families, she expressed real hope that she could actually fit in. Her family had tears in their eyes as they saw a safe haven for their child. Having a small school alternative available is crucial to providing equity to this student and her family. And we see stories like this constantly: families and students seeking a smaller, more personalized setting for their unique educational needs.

We should promote equity by developing educational policy that *increases* the diversity of opportunities for all of our kids and families, rather than decreases them. And while we most certainly must make good decisions about what parts of our system are eligible for public dollars, we do have the ability to make wise policy decisions that express our shared values. But H.483 isn't it.

The diversity of types of schools among the state's "independent schools" is vast, and policymakers need to take this diversity sufficiently into account. While H.483 might be manageable for some independent schools, it could crush others-- schools that are completely worthy of public support. And it is precisely this diversity that makes our educational landscape more responsive to our kids and families. We make bad decisions if we base them solely on isolated cost data without really understanding the educational pedagogy and relationships and settings. I urge you to vote "no" on this bill, and to refocus your policy work on promoting smaller and more diverse schools that are key to catalyzing improvement in our whole educational system.

What Vermont's independent schools do have in common is they are all valuable resources in our overall educational landscape to help prepare students-- all students-- to contribute toward a more peaceful, prosperous and just world. Our whole educational system shares that mission, and public policy should be crafted to promote these values.