

## **H.180. An act relating to the closure of an elementary school.**

My name is Herb Olson. I represent the Addison-4 legislative district of Bristol, Lincoln, Monkton and Starksboro.

- I want to thank the Committee for listening to me today to talk about H.180, An act relating to the closure of an elementary school. I also want to thank the Committee for its hard work, and its clear commitment to the thorough review of Vermont's education system we all need.
- Our children's education is the highest priority of a decent and hopeful society, but we are in danger of losing public support for education. That would be tragic, for our students, for our society, and for our democracy.
- Changes are needed in many areas of the education system. How do we tax ourselves equitably and affordably to pay for a quality education for all students? How do we make the difficult decisions about education costs?
- Some folks say that small community schools are too expensive, and that they do not provide students with the quality education they need. They have proposed arbitrary measures to close elementary schools, for example student enrollment thresholds of 450 students, or 300, or 200. Other folks want policy makers to respect and empathize with the social and economic devastation felt when powerful entities close an elementary school without the consent of the community.
- H.180 proposes a more inclusive, more equitable, and more rational way to look at the financial and educational value of community schools. H.180 proposes to look at elementary schools on a case-by-case basis, and to use a fair process and fair standards before deciding whether to close an elementary school.
- With a case by case review, some community schools will be able to show that the school provides a good education to its students, at a reasonable cost, and therefore should remain open. Some community schools may not be able to pass the test, but using a public, fair process with fair standards to make that decision may soften the blow to the community.
- Should the Committee decide to take up the bill, on its own or as part of larger legislative education reform effort, the concept proposed in the bill can be a good vehicle for the Committee to talk about the issue of smaller, community schools. The concept of a case by case analysis before an elementary school is closed dovetails well with legislative goals of a data-driven scrutiny of education costs, and ensuring education quality, especially for low income and other marginalized students.
- Potential witnesses:
  - Professor Mara Tieken of Bates College, Maine [<https://www.bates.edu/education/faculty/tieken-mara/>] is a national expert on the effects of school closures, and author of "Why Rural Schools Matter". Professor Tieken can talk about national research on school closures, including impacts on finances, academics, social factors, community and the economy, and equity.
  - Jeanne Albert, Ph.D., of Lincoln, Vermont is the Chair of the Lincoln School District Board. [[jalbert@middlebury.edu](mailto:jalbert@middlebury.edu)] Dr. Albert is a retired mathematics professor with more than 35 years' experience teaching mathematics– at

Dartmouth, Castleton, and most recently, Middlebury College. Dr. Albert can provide recent Vermont examples where closing small schools did not lead to decreases in per-pupil district spending. She can also share current FY26 budget information about the Lincoln School District– the smallest Supervisory District in the state– including that the District has the lowest projected per-pupil spending and tax rates in Addison County, while maintaining (or expanding) all current programs and services.

- John Castle is the Executive Director of the Vermont Rural Education Collaborative, and the former Superintendent of the North Country Supervisory Union. and the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union. [[vrecdirector@gmail.com](mailto:vrecdirector@gmail.com)] Mr. Castle can speak to the range of options for addressing declining enrollment as well as effective financial and program practices in managing education spending at small schools. In addition, Mr. Castle can speak to the many considerations that should be discussed in connection with elementary school consolidation, and why closing small community schools often does not result in hoped-for educational and cost outcomes.
- Thomas Frazier [802-485-8649] from the Town of Roxbury, Katie Grenon [802-782-7963] from the Town of Waterville, and Hannah Zajac [[zajac@gmail.com](mailto:zajac@gmail.com)] from the Town of Roxbury are among many ordinary citizens who can offer testimony concerning the devastating impact on communities and students after their school has been closed. Those impacts include:
  - The sense of loss, the feeling of being left behind by impersonal forces.
  - Long bus rides for elementary school-aged children.
  - An increase in homeschooling.
  - The difficulties and the costs to the community of maintaining left-behind buildings.

In closing, I want to thank the Committee for listening to me concerning community elementary schools. I stand ready, together with many others across Vermont, to help you as you grapple with the many complex issues involved in promoting much needed reform of our education system.