

Testimony of Rep. Herb Olson before the Vermont House Education Committee,
January 22, 2026.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Committee concerning H.681, An Act
Relating to Voter Approval Before School Closure.

- Closing a community elementary school is an existential event for students, parents and communities.
 - For many rural communities, their local school is the local institution that sustains them. Communities across the State will be devastated if they feel their school has been closed without acknowledgement of their voice, and without recognizing the benefits of the school to their students.
 - Maintaining a sense of trust between a district and the residents it serves is critical for the future for education in Vermont. If Vermonters lose their trust in government, and in the education system, we are heading for perilous times.
 - It's very important that communities have a meaningful voice before their elementary school is closed. This goes to the core of what citizens expect from their government: that they have been listened to, that decisions make sense, and that decision makers are acting within an accountable framework.
- Not all schools must close. Not all schools should stay open.
- Before a community school is closed, there needs to be a case by case look at the value of that particular school to students, parents, and the community.
 - What do the educational quality measures say? Will the school where students are proposed to be moved provide a better education? How will students from lower income households and other marginalized students be affected? Research from [Arkansas](#) and [North Carolina](#) supports the conclusion that marginalized students suffer when their community school is closed.

- What is the impact of closing the school to the community? Research endorses the conclusion that [small towns suffer](#) when their community school is closed. Do we value our rural communities?
 - How long will student bus rides take out of the school day? What are the ages of affected students? Elementary students may be harmed with longer bus rides in ways that high school students are not.
 - Is the community school financially viable, and do the potential cost savings outweigh the educational benefits of that community school to its students? Will closing an elementary school result in significant district budget savings? Our experience with [Act 46](#) suggests otherwise.
- Cost savings in our education system are critical. Taxes and tax increases reflect the expenses that are paid for from the Education Fund, Expenses need to be constrained to keep property taxes reasonable. My feeling is that schools should be encouraged or required to join with other districts to realize savings, for example through Cooperative Education Service Areas, before closing a community elementary school that may be offering a good education to students. My feeling also is that to achieve cost savings we should be moving towards regional high schools, integrated with Career Tech Centers, rather than closing elementary schools.
- An accountable process is the key to showing communities that they have had a meaningful voice before their school is closed. What is appropriate accountability when a community school is proposed to be closed?
 - Current law, 16 V.S.A section 563(7), provides that a school board may close a school for any reason, or for no reason at all. This arbitrary statutory framework needs to be amended to reflect good public policy and the interests of our State and our communities.
 - An administrative hearing process can provide accountability and a meaningful voice to the community, with clear standards on the information that needs to be considered, and a process to ensure that the information is fairly considered and the decision is supported by the information.

- A vote in the town where the school is located can provide accountability.
This is the intent of H.681.
 - Who do we trust about whether a particular school should stay open, or should close? The State or a School Board? Or the voters in the community? I trust the voters to make that decision, provided they are given good information about the educational value of the school to kids, and the financial viability of the school.
- An accountable community voice process, whether by administrative hearing or by vote, must address issues of majority power versus minority rights. Especially in a multi-town district, the majority may very well impose its will on the minority of voters and residents whose school the majority seeks to close. Any measure to provide for a meaningful voice before a community's school is closed needs to protect the minority rights of the smaller community.

Should the Committee consider additional testimony on the H.681, I suggest the Committee hear from:

- Mara Tieken, Professor and Researcher at the University of Maine.
- Tom Frazier, Resident and Taxpayer in Roxbury, whose elementary school was closed against the wishes of the minority of voters in their school district.
- Members of the Rural Community Schools Alliance.

Thank you for listening. I'm happy to answer any questions.

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