

My name is Kay Freedy. I am a resident of Danville. I serve on the Danville School Board, and I have been a teacher at Hazen Union School in Hardwick for the past ten years. My experience is shaped by both of my roles in Vermont's rural public education landscape. However, I want to be clear that I speak today only as an individual who cares deeply about my Northeast Kingdom communities, our schools, our students, and the future that we must work to create and sustain together.

Danville is a small town in a unique position. We have a PK-12 public school of 317 students. Danville High School has 88 students, and it is the only public high school in our corner of the Northeast Kingdom. We serve all Danville residents as well as students from surrounding towns who choose to attend Danville School.

Students choose Danville because of the opportunities to build close relationships in our small school environment. We also receive a greater portion of students whose needs for special education and other support services can not or will not be met at our neighboring independent schools. As we crunch the budget numbers we see special education, health insurance, mental health services, and transportation costs continuing to outpace inflation and the ability of our taxpayers to comfortably pay property tax bills. In our current system, public schools must play by different rules than the independent schools that also receive public tuition dollars. It feels like playing a basketball game, but only one team is allowed to tie their shoes.

October 7th the Danville School Board received a petition that called for a town vote on whether to close our high school at the end of this school year. An intense period of important—though difficult and contentious—conversations ensued fueled by rumors, projections, and assumptions associated with the possible ramifications of Act 73. Taxpayers wanted to know if closing our high school and tuitioning our 9th-12th graders would save them money. There were lots of unanswerable questions, many of them based in the uncertainty of state education legislation, but it became clear that at least in the first year, our taxes would increase if we closed our high school. Many Danville residents, students, and school staff members made passionate arguments for maintaining our high school and against Act 73. Throughout the process, Danville neighbors on both sides of the vote wanted to make their own decisions about our school before a decision was made for us outside of local connections with our community's needs and goals.

Ultimately, Danville voters packed our school gymnasium on a Saturday afternoon in December for an in-person only vote on high school closure. By a margin of 480 to 75, Danville voters overwhelmingly showed their support in favor of continuing to operate Danville High School. The entire legislature would do well to pay attention to those numbers. 480 to 75 voters in a very "purple" town voted to operate a small yet tenacious rural public school where students have access to academic and extracurricular opportunities not despite our size but because of it. 480 to 75 Danville voters recognized that Danville School is educating our children and those of our neighboring towns in the most appropriate, equitable, and accessible way possible. 480 to 75 voters found it was in their own and their town's best interest to keep our tax dollars in our public school system.

If we are seeking to improve public education in Vermont, let's do that in a way that we might all be able to get behind. In many parts of the state, expending educator energy on chasing class size minimums as the state's metric for success, is only leading to some twisted version of *Survivor*. Instead, let's focus that energy and professional expertise on tackling improved educational outcomes. Let's focus on improving literacy, communication, and critical thinking skills among our students. Let's focus on graduating young adults who are prepared to enter an academic institution, training program, or career field of their choosing and become contributing adults in our communities.

Public education is a foundation of our democracy, and I am not ready to give up on either our democracy or equitable access to public education in Vermont.