

I'm Jenna O'Farrell, St. Johnsbury. Over the past 28 years I have worked in the Northeast Kingdom. I have operated independent therapeutic schools; I was a public-school principal; I have been a public school and independent school parent, and I am a corporator at an independent school. This month I am finishing my 6-year term on the State Board of Education. Any opinions I express are solely my own and do not express the views or opinions of the State Board of Education. I am currently the executive director of Northeast Kingdom Community Action or NEKCA. Community Agencies were founded in 1964 through President Johnson's primary legislation in the War on Poverty – The Economic Opportunity Act. Every county in the United States is served by a community action agency. In Vermont, we have 5 CAA's (NEKCA, Capstone, SEVCA, BROCC and CVOEO) that together make up the Vermont Community Action Partnership and work to mitigate the impacts of poverty by building self-sufficiency, strengthening families and communities.

At NEKCA, we operate 9 HeadStart programs, 8 of which are center-based pre-kindergarten programs that serve income eligible families who are at or below the federal poverty level. Our HeadStart centers are located in the most rural parts of the Northeast Kingdom that often do not have other community-based, local PreK options.

Over the past few weeks, I've watched your committee work and had the opportunity to meet with both Representative Harple and Representative Quimby. Your work does not go unnoticed or unappreciated, and your thoughtful inquiry is truly admirable. In the process of visioning our statewide educational ecosystem, you've listened to numerous presentations on funding formulas and efficiencies, governance structures, building construction, and consolidation considerations. You are currently in the process of digesting feeding patterns, scale and optimal instructional support, district equity, attendance zones, school choice schools, and rulemaking. The Governor's plan is an extremely technical plan. The architecture is complex. I think most Vermonters support the "why" of the plan – we all want a lower tax bill, high quality educational programs, and local governance opportunities. What hasn't been remotely clear is the "how". How is this plan going to be implemented? Historically, and currently, Vermont has an educational implementation issue that exceeds funding constraints.

The Governor's plan has shades of other initiatives that are not fully managed (School Advisory Councils = CIP/ESSA & Act 168 –Boards of Cooperative Education Services/Community Schools = Educational Service Agencies). This 5 district plan has been presented without the AOE fully evaluating if the consolidation under Act 46 yielded the intended results. In the AOE's widely distributed documents outlining Governor Scott's Education Transformation Proposal, the word "practical" is not mentioned. Although, I have not heard Secretary Saunders and/or Deputy Secretary Jill Briggs Campbell describe the plan without using the word "practical" ad nauseam. It makes me wonder why a Statewide plan that promises coherent systems and aligned structures to achieve greater outcomes is actually built on a series of exceptions made from "practicalities".

In the NEK, there seems to be an extraordinary level of "practicality" applied to an already complex structure. For example, Secretary Saunders has discussed her concern with data suppression that occurs in small schools to protect student privacy. Therefore, she raises the need to consolidate schools. But wait, that's not "practical" because some schools are "small by

necessity” due to their geography. Additionally, the plan outlines the designation of a school choice school* in each district that may not be accessible to all students because of where they live and providing transportation might also not be “practical”.

*School Choice School – private school, approved independent school, public school, school of choice, or a magnet school – all terms the AOE teams are referencing)

The plan calls for tuition to remain in state. In the NEK, we have students attending high school in New Hampshire which also happens South of us in Orange and Windsor counties. Will this be another exception?

Unfortunately, this plan is murky, confusing and doesn’t seem to speak to what parent's value the most– their children. The most important thing in a school is the teacher in the classroom that spends the greatest amount of time with the child. Relationships lie at the heart of education. The thought of entering your child into a lottery to see if they can attend your community school is outlandish.

I know you had a discussion around equalizing teacher pay with a comment that housing cost more in Chittenden county, therefore teachers should earn more than those in the NEK perhaps. Is that another exception to consider? I hope you don’t.

The NEK is 648,000 square miles – it is geographically the size of the state of Delaware with only 65,000 people. We would require a considerable number of exemptions based on “practicality”. How do all the exceptions contribute to implementing a statewide plan with fidelity? It is difficult to support this plan until the “how” is revealed and unfortunately, and fortunately, dismantling current operations and adopting new governance models, new funding models, new mergers.... takes time.

In the absence of the “how” - how is this going to work in my town, for my child, and with the general consensus of the “why”, I encourage you to put forward a bill that directly addresses the funding formula first. I believe that Vermonters are united in that something’s got to change - although digesting dramatic change that is sweeping in scope is difficult, especially in a charged political environment. The NEK would benefit from a plan that focused on shifts in a funding formula, first, followed by a plan that highlights incremental, scaffolded transitions in redistricting, voting wards, governance, lotteries, school choice schools, etc.