

My name is Teal Sallen and I live in Bethel, Vermont. I am the After School Club Coordinator at the Middle School and Mom of a Middle Schooler and an Elementary Schooler. Preparing to speak before the committee it was difficult to summarize my many thoughts about the importance of community schools to students and families. I mentioned the importance of giving kids somewhere safe, supportive, and accessible after school. I talked about the very real impact of alloparenting on child development, and told a brief story about a student that I felt was benefitting in a tangible way from the fact that we knew something about their struggles on a personal level. It was hard to leave many more things unsaid, and I was eager to send you my full comments as you suggested. As I listened to others' comments, however, I was relieved to hear my own concerns echoed by other community members.

Clearly our collective feelings on the matter are unified, and passionate. But there was one perspective that I had not considered, one which really opened my eyes to the gravity of the situation. The most convincing case I heard in defense of Community Schools had nothing to do with the quality of education, or commuting time, or student teacher ratios. It was about the very real prospect of the socioeconomic death by attrition of our towns.

My main takeaway after hearing what my community had to say was this: If a town is like an ecosystem, then the school is the keystone species. Remove the keystone species, and the entire ecosystem collapses. Remove the school and we will be looking at job loss, small business collapse, declining population and plunging property values. Which brings us back to the empty school, itself a piece of real estate which will become immediately unappealing to developers who would prefer to invest in vibrant, thriving communities (which, incidentally, generally have schools that contain actual children.) Thus, the decomposing hulk of the dead school will continue to cost the community money, like "The Money Pit" on steroids.

When I arrived at the High School this afternoon to have my say, I thought the conversation was about the value of small community based schools vs. large consolidated schools. I now see that this was a reductive assessment of a proposition with much more far reaching ramifications.

Based on what I heard today, it sounds like removing a school from a community will hurt every person who lives in the geographic area, every business, every farm. The sustainable economy Vermont has been trying so hard to build? Forget it. The creative economy I am a part of as an Artist? Kaput. Even if you do not have children in school, even if you don't care if children and families are nurtured by a supportive culture, even if you don't give a flying monkey feather how long kids spend on a bus or how far parents have to drive, removing the school from your community is likely to have a negative effect on your quality of life. Many people spoke to this with more eloquence and evidence than I can, but I heard them, loud and clear: delete a school and there will be a ripple effect of decline that will spread through the community and turn it into a ghost town.

How many Vermont towns can you gut this way before you irrevocably damage the economy of the entire state? How can you hear the words "employment desert" and think "ah, all will be well?" It sounds troublingly apocalyptic to me, and I challenge our leadership to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that any of this is a good idea.

Thank you for accepting our comments. I hope they mean something to our legislators.