

Hello everyone, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Tommy Amber. I live in Chelsea and I am a senior this year at Thetford Academy. I'm also number four of five children. All three of my older siblings graduated from Chelsea High School. I always assumed that this year I would be graduating from Chelsea just like they did. You can imagine my heartbreak when I learned that Chelsea would be closing its doors forever and I would not get the chance to graduate from the same high school as my older siblings.

I have always believed that a high school is the lifeblood of a small town community. This couldn't have been more true in Chelsea. So when the high school closed, it felt like the community closed with it. I can remember countless times when I was younger going to Chelsea basketball games. Everybody I knew was there. Everybody from town came to socialize and catch up with one another and see people they might not always see. They all knew someone on the court and came to support the children of Chelsea. Those games were a huge part of the community at Chelsea, no matter the season. Sometimes it was a schoolwide play, other nights it was a K-12 concert. There are no longer events like that for our community. There is no longer a regular place where everyone meets and socializes this way. Maybe if you have a student in the middle school you go to their events, but this larger community involvement just doesn't happen any longer.

For my friends and I, the closing of the high school also had a big impact on us on a personal level. We now had to choose a new school, go there, make more friends, all in one of the more stressful times of our lives to that point so far, starting high school. I chose Thetford because I loved the sense of community there and I felt a sense of belonging at a time where I felt I was losing my base. For my friends and I, Thetford has been very beneficial to our education. Thetford has provided us with many opportunities that we might not have had at Chelsea. I have been able to take a variety of classes for many of my interests and I have been able to take a CCV online college course through Thetford. My friends have been able to attend the technological program at Riverbend in Bradford and another one just took a class at Dartmouth. We have had many opportunities we might not have had at a smaller school. I would however like to mention that Chelsea always worked hard to prepare its students for life after high school and provide them with as many opportunities as possible. My siblings went to The Mountain School and took college classes through the VAST program at VTC. Chelsea definitely prepared its students. I have cousins that graduated from Chelsea and went on to Princeton, Yale, and Clarkson. Two of my siblings went to Oberlin and one went to Marlboro. So while I have had many opportunities that I might not have had, Chelsea also gave its students all it could.

I have had a great experience at Thetford but I don't think everyone would. TA best suited me but it doesn't suit others. I know people who are thriving in White River, Spaulding, Randolph, and Sharon. That is awesome for them. I would not thrive as much in those places as I do at Thetford. For this reason, I think preserving school choice is an essential part of how education has to evolve in small towns. We have to choice to pick the school that best suits us. I would not want to go to any other school and I know that some kids wouldn't thrive at Thetford. Everyone is different. That is why choice is so important. If you want your students to be the best they can be it is important that they are able to pick the school that will help them get there. The last round of mergers caused our town to already lose so much. I cannot fathom also losing this choice for future students. It was one positive that came out of a tough choice.

In my opinion, a big negative of Chelsea changing to a sending school is the increased distance to attend high school. I am a three-sport athlete, playing soccer, basketball, and baseball. Because of this I have had to either drive myself or find rides from older teammates who live in Chelsea before I had a license. This means that on a given day I can leave at 7am and get back at 10:00pm or even 11:00pm on a far-away game. This is dangerous, especially in the winter on icy roads with new drivers. This also shifts the stress to families as they need to find rides, drive their kids, pay for gas, or find a car for their kid. This can be really hard for some families and children to do. It was a lot easier when practice was 10 minutes from your house. It also prevents some students from participating in activities because they may not have access to options for transportation. After all, the bus back from the game only gets you to the school and it's up to your family to get you all the way back to Chelsea from there.

The same can be said for any extra curricular activities- theater, debate, any club that happens after school hours requires an extra 30 minutes of transportation or more on top of the ride to and from the event from the school. This doesn't factor in the countless hours spent waiting in the lobby of the school for practices to start because we can't get home between school and practice. That's a whole other topic.

In closing I want to leave you with the three main takeaways I have found in reflecting on my high school career. First is the opportunity I have gained going to Thetford. Second is the community that was lost when Chelsea High School closed. Lastly, one of the most important takeaways in my opinion is that this only works if the kids get to choose what school fits them best and get to go there. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.