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Dear Friends:

The education system of the State of Vermont is under assault and we have little time to respond.

The Education Committee of the Vermont legislature has before it an omnibus education bill that has been developed by Vermont Commissioner Case, and is being considered for rail-roading through the legislature this weekend. It's effect will be to destroy Vermont's local school systems. We'll need your help to turn this situation around, but you'll need to act fast.

Here's what you need to know:

This bill, as developed, has completely ignored input from school boards across the state! It flies in the face of petitions by board members and resolutions by selectboards

Those boards, composed of people you know and trust, have asked that the state take spare us yet another "master plan for education," given our past experience.

It has asked the state to interfere as little as possible with community education, only asking that

funding be more fair

non-educational administrative tasks be considered for centralization and

schools be allowed to collaborate across district boundaries to improve performance and improve educational efficiencies in a manner that makes most sense to the communicates affected by any change.

School boards and select-boards have likewise asked repeatedly that imposed mandates such as special education be paired with state and federal funding and expertise, especially on issues like special Ed clinical assessments.

School Boards across the state have already had meetings on portions of this proposal and their opinion is a matter of public record. Unfortunately, when boards have attempted to meet with commissioner Case, we have been ignored. Worse, we have been insulted by PR "forums" such as a recent fiasco in Springfield, where the Commissioner of Education was supposed to conduct a "dialogue" with us. When we arrived, we learned that the "dialogue" consisted of a DVD player with a bad sound system. The results of this and similar meetings have been ignored by the Commissioner and the state board when they have not been totally mis-characterized.

The commissioner has a plan and doesn't want you to know about it. As written, his proposed legislation ignores school board input and common sense. It amounts to little more than an unprincipled power grab. It would give the same Commissioner of Education who has ignored elected board input all year unprecedented unilateral power to redraw supervisory districts. It would allow him to do so by December 1st of this year, throwing educational planning into chaos in every school in the state.

The type of broad regional consolidation of schools it would mandate would place severe hardships on residents of rural communities, and force community schools to share resources and in many cases simply close their doors, with the option that communities could buy back buildings they have already paid for.

The Vermont School Board Association has noted that the bill essentially ends local control of schools in the state. As they state, "This proposal vests extraordinary authority in the Commissioner of Education. The draft bill contains no direct way for the legislature to reject the Commissioner's plan."

This plan would take away all power from your local school boards and put all that power in an appointed "Education Restructuring Commission," .This Commission would be responsive only to the Commissioner. It would be allowed to override the school districts and supervisory unions established by local taxpayers and the investments made by taxpayers in equipment and infrastructure. But the commission structure would be a sham. The commission would only have the power to recommend. The Commission would only last a few weeks in any case. Irrespective of "Commission" input, the Commissioner's plan would be ready-to-go in January. As for you, the voter and your school board members? Your task would be to reduced to bystanders, obligated to shut up and pay your taxes.

The Commissioner who has ignored your educational representatives would have all the power. His apologists claim there is to be a set of "fig leaf" public hearings on the proposal, but these would take place AFTER the law and plan is in effect! Since earlier meetings have had absolutely no impact on the commissioner's recommendations, we should assume that the results of such hearings will be as ham-handed and dishonestly conducted as the initial meetings

In any case, the plan would be set in stone at the outset. Your local school boards would be replaced by so-called "community councils", covering gerrymandered community districts to be designed at the whim of the commissioner. These councils would not necessarily have the power to govern, but would exist to "ensure community involvement with local school decisions" whatever that means.

Worse, these boards would feature "weighted voting" system of dubious constitutionality, As envisioned, they would effectively eliminate small town involvement in the operation of their schools.

School members from rural communities would have a place at the table, through “equitable membership” but little towns in big districts dominated by a larger community would have no effective vote on school operations taxes or any other matter.

These so-called “community councils” will effectively replace school boards with unelected bureaucrats responsive to lobbying groups and gubernatorial political decisions. The bill proposes to destroy a community-governing model that has led to Vermont’s having some of the highest educational achievements of any state in the union. Its replacement would be a system typical of dysfunctional educational backwaters like Mississippi and Texas, without even the modest nod towards democratic accountability found in those states.

Worse still, rural education would be subject to a “reductionist” fiscal timetable that would make it almost impossible to operate small-town schools after 2010.

As the VSBA notes, the proposal would penalize as many as eighty school districts so severely as to essentially mandate their closure. Many of these districts are small and poor. The communities they represent are the heart of traditional rural Vermont. No matter, residents in these communities might as well get their children used to the long bus rides to distant schools and distant teachers- or move.

We all know that small and impoverished communities have higher than average special education burdens. Nevertheless, the same program that would crush rural schools would also cut funds from poor towns with high special education costs. A single family moving into a rural community would be sufficient to trigger massive penalties by the state. How this squares with equal access to education is beyond understanding. Communities would have no appeal from state financial penalties as high as 25%.

As crafted, the law would flirt with the violation of federal laws designed to guarantee the rights of handicapped students. Financial teams from the state would have the authority to override federal legislation about how individualized education plans are developed. Not only is this disingenuous, but it virtually invites costly federal lawsuits.

Collective bargaining regimes would be likewise be affected. Communities would be forced into new district-wide bargaining arrangements irrespective of the wishes of their residents, their teachers, or anyone else.

A statewide calendar would be placed in effect, which could make it difficult for small towns to use their schools to conduct town meetings. Schools who might wish to experiment with longer school years and other strategies to improve performance would be faced with a state-mandated calendar of only 175 student days a year. The logic of such mandates is a mystery, but such is the nature of top-down, unresponsive, centralized bureaucratic control.

Financial data and reporting systems would be likewise consolidated away from local control. In many cases, this would mean replacing well-functioning local budgetary and reporting systems with state systems, which today have difficulty counting students, special education students, or much of anything else with any level of local accuracy.

As for the actual, real-world problems your school officials have asked to be redressed?

They would be hidden away in “study committees.” Want unfunded mandates to be addressed? Don’t worry, there will be a “study committee”! Want state Medicaid funds to pay for clinical services mandated by state and federal law? Again, there will be a “study committee” set up to look at that.

It is hard to imagine a bill more contemptuous of the communities of the state of Vermont.

That this bill would emerge only after town meetings have been held, and would be scheduled for a quick vote on a Friday, only confirms one thing; That the commissioner and his allies in the legislature are aware of the firestorm this proposed law will generate when communities realize what has been taken away from them.

Please let your representative know that this bill needs to be taken off the fast track of approval and that the communities of this state need to be properly informed before this or any other law this drastic is to be passed into law. Please pass this note on to your local school board officials for their comment.

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