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Testimony on Small Schools Grants
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As the school board chair of the Lowell Graded School for the past 13 Years, and the member for North Country Supervisory Union board, I've seen many of our schools in the Northeast Kingdom work their way through one crisis after another. Annually, we undergo what I call "budget anxiety"; will our communities support our carefully crafted budgets? This while knowing that they will likely present to the community a school budget that has one of the lowest for per-pupil-cost in the state of Vermont.

In addition to the anxiety over whether the budget will pass muster with our fiscally conservative constituents – households that are for the most part operating on the fringe of the economic spectrum - a main worry is the loss of what is appropriately termed *Small Schools Grants*.

In a supervisory union that is mostly dependent on *Small Schools Grants* (7 of our 11 schools receive them), Lowell Graded School is a poster child for why they are so important. You see we operate without a safety net. We fill mandated positions at the school with *partial* FTEs. Physical education (.4), media & tech (we look for instructors with dual skills to save cost is .8 for both), arts (.2), guidance counselor (.5), band/music (.4) and nursing (.4) positions are partial. In this way, we meet the minimum standard for those positions and stay within a very tight budget. Currently the Small Schools Grant makes up 9% of the Lowell School budget. What will cutting *Small Schools Grants* have on our students' well being?

We depend on local merchants to give us the absolute best price on materials and services knowing that it takes that to keep our building and grounds safe and looking in a way that makes us proud of our little school. Pride is important to our families and our students. In our neck of the woods in a down economy - and make no mistake ours is always a down economy – you find pride in surviving with dignity.

The fact that 82.4% of our community's families, the highest percentage in the state, qualify for what is know as "free and reduced lunches" is critical to understanding our perceptions. Our budget includes free breakfast for all because even though it strains an already stretched budget; the teachers tell us it is as necessary as such offerings as reading, math and universal Pre-K to student success.

At a per-pupil cost of \$11,676 we traditionally rank in the lower 25th percentile of that category in the state. We reach that level year-in and year-out. We don't brag about those numbers, but we do take pride in the fact that we deliver the best education possible at a price almost all schools in the state would envy. The Lowell community has supported and approved our school budget every year for the past 13 years in great part because they recognize the virtues of value and quality-both things for which they take great pride.

While our little school in our little town has pride, we are not so proud as to not understand that assistance from local contractors, parents, friends, committed staff and the State of Vermont is essential to how we do what we do. We welcome the support we have received, and hope to continue to receive, from the state in the form the *Small Schools Grants*. These grants allow us to be the best we can be. We operate, as the phrase goes, with the understanding that *willful waste makes woeful want*.

All of the seven small schools in the North Country Supervisory Union that receive *Small Schools Grants* operate under much the same conditions as our proud little school in Lowell. Others in the state will make the argument that the state has a mandate or legal responsibility to maintain those grants, we in Lowell feel it may be on the order of a moral responsibility. For that, I leave it to each of you to decide.