

To the Vermont State Board of Education Small Schools Grants

I am communicating to the State Board of Education related to the issue of **equity**. Equity for children who happen to live in sparsely populated places, for children who live on rural dirt roads, for economically disadvantaged children who attend Vermont's small schools.

Vermont is one of the most rural states in the nation.

82.6 percent of the population lives in either a rural area or a small town of less than 2,500 people. Vermont has the highest % of rural students in the country at 55%.

The highest child poverty rates in Vermont are in the most rural counties, Essex Orleans and Caledonia. 18 of the 34 small schools, more than 50%, on the current list of eligible schools are in these 3 counties. For example Lowell, on the 2011 geographically isolated list, currently has an 82.4% poverty rate.

The Vermont Constitution requires we provide an excellent and equitable education for all Vermont students, regardless of where they live or the size of the school they attend. Small Schools grants began as an equity component in Act 60 to ensure there was a level playing field, so that students who happened to live on rural dirt roads and attend small schools would have an equal opportunity to attend as good a school as a student from a town or city could.

Removing small schools grants from high poverty schools directly impacts the balance Brigham sort to achieve via Act 60. When additional funds in the form of tax incentives, merger support grants and permanent small schools grants go to wealthier towns around the state the fine balance of equalized spending is tipped away from equity. Until a weighting study takes place and weighting adjustments are made for poverty within the funding formula we are reliant on the mechanism of small schools grants to build fairness into the system. This is why the legislature did not eliminate small schools grants but kept them as a vital component in Act 46 and 49. They should be attainable for schools not impossible to achieve.

Consider what kind of Vermont we want in the future? Do we want thriving rural communities? Or do we want hollowed out rural communities with young children on buses a considerable amount of time to central hubs? While union high schools may make sense for grades 9 -12, and longer bus rides be more feasible for this age group, creating that same structure for PK-8th grade students will result in hollowed out rural communities and excessive bus rides for young children. Over time it will literally change the landscape of Vermont. * For areas without union high schools the barriers are even greater and the rides even longer.

Families will go where the schools are. They will not move to communities without elementary schools. This impacts participation in educational opportunities as well as directly impacting community economic development and precipitating economic decline. Assuming Vermonters want thriving rural communities we need to ensure we have thriving rural schools, schooling and economic development are intertwined.

In developing metrics for small schools grants please remember that it is the purpose of a small schools grant to support and help a school provide equity of opportunity for their students. That is the fundamental question to ask of a school receiving a small schools grant.

"How are the additional small school grant funds being used to provide equity of opportunity for students particularly students from economically deprived backgrounds?"

Geographic Isolation

What is equitable for Vermont children who live on rural dirt roads in isolated and sparsely populated communities? Though these schools are relatively small, they may not have declining enrollment e.g. Montgomerly, Barnard, Marlboro and their towns may not be geographically small e.g.

Montgomery is the 5 largest town in the state by area 56.70 square miles. It takes a long time to get around a town that size on dirt roads in a school bus before even getting to Montgomery school.

As a past member of the board I know how important it is for you to make decisions, which do no harm to children. Make this decision based on a realistic definition of geographic isolation, which includes town geography and the time it currently takes to get to a school in addition to school-to-school distance as required by the law. Recognize that kids do not sleep at school; they have to get there before they can be bused to the next nearest school with capacity. As we now have a number of 4 year olds riding buses to preschool consider the reality of this daily journey in developing this metric. Using the law as your guide, make a decision in the best interests of children using multiple metrics.

Do not make the same mistake as West Virginia, which closed community schools in favor of regional hubs and routinely has children on buses for 3 hours daily. Read the stories from other states. *

Suggested metric for Geographic Isolation: -

- **Please consider the use of multiple measures e.g. TIME and MILES.**
- **Time to the town school district plus time to the next nearest school with capacity.**
- **For example - A school is geographically isolated if the total time of the regular bus route combined with the time to the next nearest school with capacity exceeds 45 minutes driving time one way or x miles.**

Note: This metric would have young children in Vermont on a school bus for a max of 1 and 1/2 hours daily. Would you want to be on a school bus 1 and ½ hours everyday on dirt roads?

Metrics for Excellence

The introductory language says, “which shall be based upon **consideration** of:” the following metrics. In this context you need to **consider** these issues you do not need to make impossible hurdles to climb.

1. **High quality educational opportunities - Suggested metric - The Vermont Education Quality Standards** are currently the standard for all schools to use to measure opportunity. An EQS review should be used as the metric to decide if a school is offering high quality educational opportunities or not.
2. **Positive outcomes of students from economically deprived backgrounds** - It is currently a goal of the SBE to close and eventually eliminate the achievement gap. How will taking \$ away from small schools help them do this? Isn't this proposed metric more likely to increase the achievement gap rather than decrease it and negatively impact children in doing so? To include only test scores as proposed metrics is likely to negatively impact children from poverty just because they attend a small school. Think about Lowell with 82.4% poverty when deciding this metric. Consider the implications of Brigham when impacting high poverty small schools.
Suggested metric: -
 - **Improved opportunities, supports and programming for students from economically deprived backgrounds as reported to the AOE by the district through the utilization of small schools grant funds.**
 - **Multiple indicators that show improvement from sources beyond test scores such as YRBS .**
3. High student to staff ratios - The legislature is talking about making student to staff ratios a statewide expectation. As a statewide standard it does not need to be duplicated here. Crafting metrics for ratios that are fair to small schools is complex, let the legislature complete this work, do not preempt it here just for a few schools.
5. Participation in a merger study and submission of a merger report - An alternative

governance structure Section 9 application is a merger study submitted and already received by the SBE. The only difference is that it is a merger study, which concluded that merger is not the best way to meet the goals of the law and proposes an alternative way to meet the goals of the law. This metric is unnecessary and dismissive of the work completed by communities.

Sincerely
Margaret MacLean

- Tom Lyson – “What does a school mean to a community? Assessing the social and economic benefits of community schools in upstate New York.”
- Beth Spence – “Long School Bus Rides. Their Effect on School Budgets, Family Life, and Student Achievement.”

Small School Poverty Rates [Source VT AOE Child Nutrition Programs 2017-2018] Total Schools 34

Lowell 82.4%

Coventry 77.8%
Charleston 75.9%

Holland 66.7%
Newport 64.8%
Doty 64.62%

Athens/Grafton 50.00%
Montgomery 49.35%
Cabot 47.5%
Guilford 45.87%
Craftsbury 45.5%
Woodbury 45.55

State Average 41.02%
Marlboro 40.51%

Orwell 38.73%
Glover 38.39%
Canaan 36.4%
Dummerston 33.10%

Folsom 25.0%
Calais 24.55%
Albert Bridge 24.14%
Peacham 21.9%

Note: Not all schools are listed the scores for 13 schools are suppressed.