

Testimony May 16th 2018—SBE  
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I am certain that each of you understands the levels of poverty in small, rural communities are 50% higher than in more densely populated communities.<sup>1</sup> I'm sure you also understand that equates to an increase in alcoholism, drug addiction, teen pregnancies, food insecurity and lack of transportation. A classroom in Glover is not the same as a classroom in Montpelier. It isn't enough to teach our students. But especially in rural Vermont, we need to do more. We need to take care of our students.

The power devolving to larger communities in merged districts will allow many to close smaller schools, not necessarily because it is in the students' best interests, but because it boosts their own enrollments and revenues. Additionally when small, rural communities that are determined to keep their schools find it harder to get the support equity demands we violate the spirit of Brigham and the promise of Act 60.

An Irish poet could have been speaking for many students in small rural towns when he wrote: “But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”

Other states have been down this path. As elementary schools close in small, rural communities there is less reason for young couples with children to move to those towns. Property values decline, tax bases erode and more and more the heartbeat of a town flatlines. In Arkansas small, rural communities have been hollowed out; in Maine there have been no savings, instead many of the marriages that resulted from these shotgun weddings are now seeking divorces; and in West Virginia young children are spending 3 hours a day on buses. Access to schools, school events and even parent teacher conferences is much more difficult, especially for the most disadvantaged parents and students.

Even though students in towns like Glover and Coventry come to school with greater needs, our teachers leave school with smaller pay checks. If small school support grants are awarded on the basis of a strict “one size fits all” formula we will only worsen that equation, making it even harder to retain the high quality teachers we need. Using standardized test scores with small cohorts from rural schools as a litmus test for support grants is like asking a jury to render a verdict after hearing 10% of the evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent U.S. Census 9.6% of the population in Chittenden County is living below the poverty line. In Orleans County 15.5% and in Essex County 15.7%.

<http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Chittenden-Vermont.html>:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/essexcountyvermont/PST045217>;

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/chittendencountyvermont/PST045216>

A simple school to school metric for geographic isolation is likewise inadequate. We have students coming to school on unpaved mountain roads from Stannard in winter who spend 45 plus minutes just to reach Lakeview. While it may only take 30 minutes to go from Lakeview to Hardwick Elementary there needs to be some accounting for the time it takes to get to Lakeview. I would also add that geographic isolation can't be considered in a vacuum. We have towns where 30% of the people live below the federal poverty line.<sup>2</sup> In Stannard one out of five people live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

When we separate young children, especially disadvantaged children, from their communities, and communities from their schools, the result, ultimately, will be a poorer and more fragmented place to live.<sup>4</sup> Vermont has opportunities like telecommuting and a growing demand for healthier foods that can help revitalize small, rural communities; or we can continue down the path of ghettoizing our small, rural towns.

Before you go down that path too far I urge you to take the poet's advice and "tread softly" because you tread on a lot of dreams.

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2 <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Brighton-Vermont.html>

3 <http://www.city-data.com/city/Stannard-Vermont.html>

4 See generally Mara Casey Tieken, *Why Rural Schools Matter*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014, p. 57 and 186-188.