

We are halfway through the 2026 legislative session. In the wake of Act 73 and the findings of the Redistricting Task Force that it created to map out drastically fewer school districts, the Legislature is no closer to agreement on next steps.

I supported H.454, which became Act 73, as it developed last year, though I was not able to vote on the final bill due to cancer treatment. I supported it at the time because change is clearly necessary. Few things are more important than our education system. If we are to be competitive with other parts of the country in attracting and retaining young working families, we need excellent schools.

Of course they also need to be affordable. It seems obvious that reducing the number of districts from 119 to a handful would save administrative expense. In the long run, that may be so — though research and testimony cited by the Task Force indicates that savings are likely less than would be expected.

The main drivers of rising costs are elsewhere: health care and insurance, special education, deferred maintenance due to lack of state construction aid, and general inflation, to name a few. Ultimately demographics is our challenge: we have some 25% fewer students than 25 years ago. Rising costs with fewer pupils sends per-pupil cost higher, and that is how spending and taxes are determined.

Furthermore, merging district systems and processes is complicated and brings upfront costs of its own. Most important, it would surely distract staff and teachers from what is really important, which is concentrating on improving the educational experience of our kids.

Education quality probably does benefit from a critical mass of students, as proponents of consolidation and minimum class sizes claim. Certainly a school with, say, a dozen students is not a service to them. But an arbitrary threshold of students per classroom ignores the reality of rural regions like the NEK.

In any case, merging districts and, in extreme cases, closing schools is difficult and often traumatic (recall Act 46 of 2015). Without local buy-in, it is divisive and can be devastating to a community. The Redistricting Task Force recognized this, and, I believe correctly, declined to draw arbitrary district consolidation maps.

Instead, the Task Force report proposed that the quickest way to control costs is not mergers but regionalizing back-office services (such as payroll, purchasing, special-ed contracts, busing, etc.) in Cooperative Education Service Areas. This would achieve a more economic scale for these services.

But the demographic reality is undeniable, and the Task Force did not deny it. Consolidation and even school closures are likely inevitable. But, again, it is far less disruptive for this to occur with local buy-in. The Task Force recommended the State support local leaders as they work with their communities to make the best strategic decisions for their situation.

Lastly, the report also recognized the importance of enhancing educational opportunities for older students through regionalizing high schools where possible.

Governor Scott dismissed the Task Force's recommendations as "political" and issued an ultimatum to the Legislature: either pass mandatory consolidation with new district maps, or he will veto the State budget.

In my view, the Governor's threat is the wrong way to achieve policy goals and is an insult to a co-equal branch of government (similar, in fact, to the current President). Frankly, the Governor's

credibility is low and getting lower, considering the persistent shortcomings of the Agency of Education, his re-appointment of an unqualified Secretary last year over rejection by the Senate, and his Administration's ineffectiveness as educational performance has declined over nearly ten years of his tenure.

I also believe the Governor, and some of my legislative colleagues, are wrong on the policy: forcing top-down, mandatory mergers — Act 46 on steroids — will not work. Restructuring a system that touches every community and nearly every family requires consensus. The Task Force is right: collaboration among local leaders and communities is the only workable path through the wrenching downsizing process ahead.

That path is further complicated by at least two aspects of school choice: maintaining access to schools in sparsely populated rural areas; and threading the needle between the Vermont Constitution's prohibition against public support for religious schools, and the U.S. Supreme Court's *Carson v. Makin* decision requiring that State tuitioning programs include religious schools.

In the NEK, school choice is a lightning-rod issue. Families move here to take advantage of it; suddenly ending it would be unfair to them. On the other hand, their neighbors just across a town line, in a town that operates a public school, don't have the luxury of choice; and that's not exactly fair to them. The Town of Kirby (my district) and Riverside School in Lyndonville are Exhibit A of this conundrum.

Some favor universal school choice, for everyone everywhere. But if we truly believe in the value of education as a bedrock of our society and democracy then we must be committed to providing that basic foundation to every child in Vermont. This requires a high-functioning public education system.

Demographics and cost pressures have public education in a vise. School choice, to the extent that it diverts students and funding away from public schools, tightens the screws. That, and appropriately limiting public funding of religious schools, demand that we determine the limits of "choice."

The limits will not be easy to define, and I am not going to try to do so here. I will say that, as a State Representative for Kirby, I could not support limits that rule out tuitioning to independent schools such as Riverside without a definition of choice that presents a clear and overriding public interest and includes a very long transition, on the order of 15 years. (The case is simpler for secondary schools in our area: the only public high school, Danville, cannot accommodate the students now attending St. Johnsbury Academy and Lyndon Institute.)

Education system reform is necessary, and I support change. But wholesale mandatory district consolidation is not the answer, and it does not appear a majority of the Legislature supports it. The Governor and the Legislature are on a collision course, and I don't know who will blink.