

# **Vermont Educational Reform: Small Schools in Balance**

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## OVERVIEW

- Background: Researchers & Policy Brief
- Context: Vermont's Rural Schools and Communities
- Research Implications: Smaller Schools
- Policy Recommendations
- Questions

# The Researchers

- Researchers & Practitioners:
  - Former elementary school teachers in Vermont, Maine & Massachusetts
  - Educational Leadership Ph.D. candidates at Penn State
- Our work:
  - Research educational leadership & policy related to rural schools and communities
  - Rural Vermont schools, local control, and NCLB

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# Penn State's Center on Rural Education & Communities

- National research & outreach center housed at Penn State
- Fosters nationally and internationally significant research and outreach to benefit rural education and communities
- Publishes relevant work after it has been reviewed by experts in the field of rural education research

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# Purpose of Brief

- Background: The H. 883 debate inspired us to investigate consolidation and its impact on rural schools and communities
- The Speaker of the House called for proposals
- Objectives: meaningfully contribute rural research to Vermont's educational reform conversation
- Independent Research: Our brief is an independent investigation; it was not sponsored or commissioned by any group

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# Context:

## Why Rural Matters in Vermont

- Vermont has the second largest percentage of rural residents in the country
- Over 74% of Vermont's public schools are located in rural communities

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# Background: Vermont's Educational Landscape

- Rural Education: The majority of the state is rural; most communities have local elementary schools
  - Rural schools: Critical role in political, economic, and social stability of rural communities
- Act 60/68: Equalized, per pupil school funding through property taxes
  - Small Schools Grants: Additional funding for 100 schools, based on student population & offsets per pupil spending
- Local Control: Decentralized education system with long history of local self-governance
  - Annual Town Meeting: Participatory democratic process for approving per pupil spending and tax rate

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# Proposed Educational Reforms

Some of the recent proposed educational reforms for Vermont include:

- H. 883 & District Consolidation
- Reforming educational funding (related to Act 60/68)
- Changing Phantom Students
- Elimination or Reduction of the Small Schools Grant

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# Proposed Reforms Related to the Small Schools Grant

## Proposed Reforms:

- Eliminate the small schools grant
- Reduce the small schools grant

## Rationale for Proposed Reforms

- Curb educational spending statewide
- Reduce educational spending in the least “cost-effective” schools
- Some proposals are intended to facilitate school consolidation through reduction of funds

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# Research Implications: Vermont's Small Schools

- In 2015, **100%** of schools receiving the small schools grant are rural
- The majority of these schools are elementary or elementary-middle schools

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# Context:

## Why Rural Schools Matter

- Rural schools are a source of community identity & pride
- Rural schools are often the major local employer
- Rural schools are one of the primary public institutions in a town and connect the community

“In many cases, the small school is the only place for the community to come together.”

- Vermont Department of Education, 1998

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# Context:

## Research on Rural Schools

Research shows different outcomes for rural communities with schools when compared with those without schools:

- Property values are higher
- Lower levels of income inequality and social services
- Higher levels of college graduates & professional workers
- More likely to have economic development & investment
- More likely to maintain or increase resident population

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# Research Implications: Small Schools & Community Sustainability

## Population Development

- Smaller rural schools stabilize populations by recruiting and retaining young families to a region

## Economic Development

- Businesses are more likely to invest in communities with strong civic engagement
- In rural regions, schools serve as a central & stabilizing force for business recruitment

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“The loss of a school erodes a community’s social and economic base – it’s sense of community, identity, and democracy – and the loss permanently diminishes the community itself, sometimes to the verge of abandonment.”

Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011

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# Research Implications: Smaller Schools & Academics

“Boys from low-income backgrounds are a group the state is consistently seeing are struggling,”  
Vermont Digger, citing Secretary Holcombe

- Smaller schools minimize the negative effects of poverty on student achievement overall
- Low-income children in smaller schools have higher individual achievement
- Vermont Examples: Montgomery Center School & The Dover School have eliminated this achievement gap

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# Current Challenges for Vermont's Rural Schools

- Persistent achievement gaps between high- and low-income students
- Significant variability: “[Vermont] towns have different circumstances and different prospects. What works in one is not likely to work in others,” AOE 2015
- Lack of data on smallest schools
- Lack of research on Vermont's rural, smaller schools

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# Alternative Policy Proposal Rationale

Primary goals in creating an alternative proposal:

- **Equal Opportunities to Learn:** strengthen academic outcomes for all students and prepare for college and career readiness
- **Community Sustainability:** Develop community connections to support & sustain communities and increase community understanding of what's happening in their schools
- Our proposal builds on educational partnerships already in place in many Vermont communities and schools.

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# Alternative Proposal Overview

1. Invest Capital in Small Schools Grants
  - Reduces per-pupil spending statewide
  - Expand support for small schools and their communities
  - Funded through legislative cost-saving initiatives
2. Competitive Tiered Small Schools Funding
  - Competitive grant application process focused on school and community capacity-building
  - Facilitated by grant consultants
  - Provides tiered inducements

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: Tiered Funding Of Small Schools Grants

## Building School & Community Capacity

### Phase 1

Retain Current Families  
Recruit New Families  
Strengthen Ties with Low-Income Families

### Phase 2

Expand community participation & support  
Increase community awareness of school funding & function

### Phase 3

Strengthen community infrastructure  
Prepare students for college and career readiness

**School – Organization Partnerships**

**School – Community Partnerships**

**School – Family Partnerships**

# Phase 1: School-Family Partnerships

## Equal Opportunities to Learn

- Retain and involve current families in schools
- Strengthen ties with low-income families to support student engagement

## Community Sustainability

- Recruit new families (e.g, homeschoolers & seasonal residents)

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# Phase 2:

## School-Community Partnerships

### Equal Opportunities to Learn

- Expand community participation in schools
- Example: community members volunteer in schools to teach lessons, lead enrichment activities & support diverse learners

### Community Sustainability

- Expand school participation in communities
- Example: place-based instruction where students learn about their communities through locally-focused lessons

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# Phase 3:

## School-Organization Partnerships

### Equal Opportunities to Learn

- Prepare students for college and career readiness through school-organization partnerships with local government, non-profits, and/or businesses
- Examples: Using problem solving or apprenticeships with local or networked communities

### Community Sustainability

- Strengthen economic infrastructure in community
- Example: Service-based learning where students work with local organizations to achieve community-wide goals through experiential learning

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Prepare students for college and career readiness

**School – Organization Partnerships**

**School – Community Partnerships**

**School – Family Partnerships**

# Conclusion

- We recommend thoughtful discussion and legislation that takes into account:
  - The role of rural schools in stabilizing their encompassing communities
  - The value of smaller schools in supporting low-income students and families
  - Increasing data collection and transparency to facilitate informed decision making for schools and communities

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# Questions

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# Response to AOE Rebuttal

- We appreciate the rebuttal, as we believe engaging with research adds to Vermont's understanding and discussion of educational reform initiatives.
- Existing research shows significant variability in district and school size and consolidation outcomes.
- Due to the limitations of Vermont-specific research and data, we brought forth rural research to expand the conversation about Vermont's rural schools and communities.

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