

From: Coriell, Scott [Scott.Coriell@state.vt.us]
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Subject: Gov. Shumlin Weekly Op-Ed

Please find below Gov. Peter Shumlin's weekly op-ed. Let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks,

Scott Coriell
Office of the Governor
(802) 353-1449

A Vermont Example
By Governor Peter Shumlin

Earlier this month, Vermonters gathered at Town Meetings around the state to make decisions large and small about their communities. This year, two towns in particular made one very large decision about the future of education in their communities. As we continue the debate in Montpelier about how to address rising school spending at a time of declining student enrollment so we can reduce the burden of property taxes on hardworking Vermonters, these two Vermont communities provide an example of how we can work together to make the difficult decisions that will be required if we are to truly make progress on this issue.

The communities are Bridgewater and Pomfret, and voters in those two towns took a proactive step to reduce spending and ensure equity and opportunity for their students by combining their K to 6th grade schools. The action approved by both towns on Town Meeting Day creates a new school, located at the campus of the present Pomfret School. That was no small decision. It means the closing of the Bridgewater School, which has been a staple of that community for over 100 years.

But here were the realities facing the two communities. Since 2011, Pomfret had seen their student count drop by 23% and per pupil spending rise by 21%. Over that same time period, Bridgewater saw their student count drop by 27% and per pupil spending rise by 53%. With declining enrollment slated to continue for the foreseeable future, that trend was not sustainable for either community.

In the end, these two communities did what we do best in Vermont. They listened to one another, they worked together, and they came up with a solution. According to Windsor Central Supervisory Union Superintendent, the Joint District School saves the Bridgewater and Pomfret voters 24% of their combined individual budgets and lowers per pupil spending to \$11,710 from \$16,564 and \$15,870, respectively. Not only does this joint venture allow Bridgewater and Pomfret to reduce costs on taxpayers, it will also allow expanded opportunities for their children. It took a tremendous amount of work and trust, but this vote leaves both taxpayers and students better positioned for the future.

The action taken by Bridgewater and Pomfret show that when we think more expansively about community we can create better opportunities for all our children. The conversation around school spending and educational quality isn't about losing something, or giving something up. It is about what can be gained, for our students, for our state, and for taxpayers. While we know that communities around Vermont have different challenges, the action by Bridgewater and Pomfret should serve as an example of how communities can and should work together to make decisions that will benefit students and taxpayers.

But it's not up to communities alone. Montpelier has a role to play to help communities come together to difficult decisions. The House Education Committee has made an important start under the leadership of Chairman David Sharpe by passing a bill that will serve as a strong foundation for work the rest of the session to provide higher quality education at a more affordable price. Lawmakers of all parties have made good on the promise to address rising property taxes by listening to all ideas and creating an atmosphere of collaboration that will be key to making progress on this issue. Together, I am hopeful that we will pass legislation to help districts control education spending, strengthen academic offerings, and ensure their schools are able to provide the best education for our children at a price taxpayers can afford.

As we work in Montpelier to come up with solutions to our school spending problem, my administration will continue to partner with communities, get them the data they need to make informed decisions about their future, and partner with them to make changes to benefit students and taxpayers. We're all in this one together, and the only way we'll solve our school spending problems is by working together. Bridgewater and Pomfret provide a great example of how we can do that.