

## **Silent Spring: Act 46 and Local Democracy**

Across Vermont, communities are voting on whether to consolidate school governance under Act 46. It's a polarizing issue, at a time when we've seen enough polarization at the national level to last a lifetime. As coauthors, we come together from the left and right to urge communities to consider carefully the trade-offs of consolidation. Often, we can do better, by stepping back to look at the big picture.

For a lesson in big-picture thinking, let's take a quick visit to the environmental movement. In 1962, scientist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a groundbreaking exposé of the over-use of chemical pesticides. One of the first books to call Americans' attention to environmental issues, *Silent Spring* revealed the link between pesticides and cancer.

Of course, pesticides like DDT were applied with good intentions—for instance, to kill mosquitoes that could carry disease. But Carson showed the grave links between pesticides, health problems, and significant bird die-offs, hence *Silent Spring's* poignant title: A spring when no birds would sing.

The most important revelation of *Silent Spring* is that you can never do just one thing. In an interconnected system, all actions must be considered with humility, and within the context of the whole. Tinkering can have devastating unintended consequences.

In 2015, the Vermont legislature passed Act 46, an education law inspired by concerns about rising property taxes, declining enrollments, and a growing achievement gap among students. But with its incentives to erase town lines for school purposes, abolish local school boards, and effectively eliminate Town Meeting Day deliberation on school issues, Act 46 pushes for a massive overhaul not simply of education, but of what it means to live in a Vermont community.

Key points that have been missed in the consolidation discussion include the following:

- 1) **Size matters.** Current district lines follow town lines, but erasing these and replacing them with regional districts means a dramatic increase in the size of the governed body. What we know from town meeting research is, the larger the town, the lower the per capita participation. Citizens understand that in a small body, their participation counts for much more than in a large one, and they feel more civic responsibility to support the common good.
- 2) **Power matters.** The current proposal dramatically reduces the number of elected representatives per citizen. This means reduced ability to know, understand, and communicate with decision makers.
- 3) **Structure matters.** It is well known that single-issue interest groups tend to dominate attendance at single-issue public meetings. But education needs the voice and wisdom of the full community. The structure must be designed to invite them in, not turn them away.

- 4) **Community matters.** Vermont is the second most rural state in the U.S. And researchers consistently rank Vermont among the highest in “social capital”—the trust, neighborliness, and volunteerism that make our society, economy and democracy function. Social capital is not some magical ingredient in Vermont’s water; it is built by having one neighborly conversation, one thoughtful compromise, one difficult meeting at a time. Consolidation flies in the face of civic research showing that America’s social capital wastelands are suburbs, where too often there is not a strong community center, and governance happens at the regional level.

Like any natural system, this one works as a loop—education supports community, community supports education. Vermont’s schools may be the single most powerful setting to inspire citizen engagement. Schools are where we spend the majority of our locally collected tax dollars. And here, we entrust what is most precious to us—our children—to a larger system.

In turn, decades of research show that schools function best when the community is involved. The future of public education depends on communities full of people who are willing to pay for good education—with their time, their wisdom, and their dollars—even though their immediate interests are not at stake. For this, we need robust democratic engagement.

Let’s be clear: Rachel Carson was not pro-malaria, and consolidation opponents are not in favor of bad schools. Carson advocated for biological pest control—a sustainable middle ground. Likewise, we can find a middle ground in school governance reform.

In Act 46, legislators included alternatives to wholesale consolidation. Vermonters should hold them to their offer. After sending back a “no” vote, communities can collaborate to create a new proposal, for instance one that retains elected local boards with key local powers (such as developing budgets and hiring the principal), while also creating a combined board for issues better decided together. This can be a Jeffersonian moment to create something that’s truly better, not to meet a one-size-fits-all mandate.

What makes no sense is the wholesale eradication of effective, responsive local school boards and the erasure of the sense of place that makes our communities function. Vermonters’ experience with self-governance lifts our politics dramatically above the national. What sets us apart is our human-scale structure, and the intermingled voices of local wisdom.

What kind of world do we want our children to graduate into? And what kind of communities create that world? What will be the impact of a silent spring, with no voices heard on Town Meeting Day? These questions, too, are our responsibility.

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