



March 18, 2010

To the editor of the Sunday Times-Argus/Rutland Herald:

I appreciate the concern expressed by Rep. Heidi Scheuermann regarding school budgets and education costs in her op-ed of March 14. She is correct in asking that communities hold school boards accountable for spending, and that student performance justify the money spent.

We are fortunate in Vermont that local communities have direct say over their school budgets. If Rep. Scheuermann's town wishes to spend a higher amount per pupil than other towns, it may. If her town feels it's appropriate to spend less, it may. Townspeople know ahead of time the consequences of their budget vote, since spending per pupil is what drives a town's local school tax rate.

Vermont's school funding system is based on local accountability and the premise that a penny on the tax rate in one town raises the same amount per pupil as a penny on the tax rate in any other town. Equal access to school funds is the equity requirement of the Vermont Supreme Court's 1997 *Brigham* decision.

It's unfortunate, then, that Rep. Scheuermann wishes to turn away from this system by re-establishing the flawed system of local school taxation. She states that her plan, as described in H. 755, would provide "substantially equal educational opportunity" through extra "categorical aid" to certain schools. Unfortunately, that model is what the state's previous "Foundation Formula" relied on and the Supreme Court found unconstitutional in 1997.

In the *Brigham* decision, "substantially equal educational opportunity" means that the state does everything in its power to equalize towns' access to education resources. Eliminating the statewide education property tax, and shifting the major funding of schools to 14 or 15 districts, as Rep. Scheuermann proposes, would take us back to the inequality that the Vermont Supreme Court said the state must avoid.

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