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## School Solution

### School Choice: The Answer Under Our Nose

by  
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On Wednesday, March 10, several cats got out of the bag in Montpelier.

The public hearing at the State House was supposed to gauge public support for consolidating public school districts. It turned out to be a powerful outcry supporting school choice in Vermont. Under current law and 140 years of tradition, parents in some ninety towns enjoy (to varying degrees) the right to send their children to any public or non-religious independent school of their choosing with tax dollars following the child.

The first cat to escape was just how much the folks in these towns value school choice for their families. They are not going to give it up without a fight, and it's easy to understand why for anyone who saw their kids, who are a product of Vermont's school choice system, [testify at Wednesday's hearing](#).

Seeing young students that passionate about their education is reason enough to embrace this system. But to watch them articulate their concerns so powerfully to a joint committee of the legislature, the press, and a few hundred onlookers with such poise and confidence is profound evidence that this system works and works well for the children lucky enough to have it. Vermont's century-and-a-half-long leadership role in publicly funded, parental school choice should not be snuffed out. The legislature should expand it for the benefit of all of our children.



The second cat was who the parents of these kids are. The public school teacher's unions and bureaucratic proponents of centralized control over education have done a good propaganda job of labeling school choice as some right wing plot. But the reality is, in Vermont, the parents who are taking advantage of school choice and the schools to which they're sending their kids are, in great part, liberal.

One could see the perplexed looks on the left-leaning legislators as they were lectured by parents and independent school teachers about the "progressive" nature of school choice: how school choice embodies the values of diversity, creativity, local control and is one of the finest features of rural Vermont today.

In fact, the hearing exploded the myth that independent schools are able to get better results for less cost by cherry picking the best and brightest students, leaving the special needs kids behind. Instead, we learned that Vermont independent schools do take special needs kids, and parents who have choice use it to find the absolute best environments for their special needs children to thrive.

It's the third cat that should really be setting off light bulbs over the heads of our elected officials. This is the number of parents who testified that they chose the towns they live in -- moved there and started or brought businesses -- specifically to be able to have the advantage of school choice for their children. These people also made it clear that if school choice goes away, they will go away too... along with the jobs and taxes they generate for Vermont.

Our state is facing a long-term economic crisis. Beyond the fact that our public education system as it exists is financially unsustainable, we are witnessing a rapid decline in our young population. K-12 students have dropped from 106,000 in 1997 to 92,000 today, and that number is still dropping. Eighteen to thirty-six-year-olds (these kids' parents for the most part) are leaving Vermont at a record pace.

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The secret is out. Vermont's school choice system does a great job of educating our kids, often at less cost to the taxpayer. It attracts entrepreneurs and job creators to our state. It has a proven track record where it is in place, and is a solution that's been under our nose as part of the fabric of Vermont's rural, progressive culture for a century and a half. Expanded school choice presents a smart solution that can help with many of Vermont's current problems. Let's just hope our legislators can recognize an opportunity when it jumps out of the bag and bites them in the wallet, just like it did last Wednesday.

*(Rob Roper is the grassroots coordinator for EdWatch Vermont)*