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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Thank you for submitting this, T.

—Jeff Potter



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 We are a canary in the coal mine

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Our debate about closing Marlboro Elementary School
3 reflects decades of anti-democratic policy and hostility to public
4 education and a profound misunderstanding of its importance in
5 our country

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 ON TOWN MEETING DAY of this year, the citizens of
8 Marlboro will decide whether to close our school and to become
9 a non-operating school district, distributing our schoolchildren
10 among neighboring towns.

11 From the way this question has been posed to the town
12 and from some of the arguments that have been presented from
13 people whose knowledge and experience of the school I respect,
14 I expect the vote to go against our school. I am not alone in this
15 expectation.

16 Some school staff are already leaving, and teachers are
17 already applying for different jobs. Families are planning to move
18 away from a town with no school, with only buses to take their
19 children elsewhere, to schools in which those families will have
20 no voice.

21 I am deeply opposed to closing our school, not because I
22 do not see and understand the issues that make its continuation
23 difficult, but because I see in our situation decades of anti-
24 democratic policy and hostility to public education and a
25 profound misunderstanding of its importance in our country. I see
26 a long-standing impatience with the values of small rural schools
27 embedded in their communities.

28 It is our duty to resist such policy, such hostility, such
29 misunderstanding, and such impatience, because our country is
30 under attack from the top, and if lose our local institutions, we
31 lose the foundation from which we must rebuild.

32 * * *

33 IN SOME RESPECTS, Marlboro may seem a special case,
34 having just lost Marlboro College, itself an extraordinary
35 educational institution which was a cultural and economic base
36 not just for the town but for this corner of the state. However, the
37 forces that have been brought to bear on Marlboro are there for
38 every small-town school in the state and, to some extent, in the
39 country. We are a canary in the coal mine.

40 So what are the forces that I see at work here? They are
41 not hidden, but they often come with a pretense of benevolence
42 and a promise for funding that turns out not to be kept.

43 At the federal level, Congress, beginning in 1975,
44 laudably passed what eventually became the Individuals with
45 Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), which required that every

46 school provide free and appropriate public education for children
47 with disabilities and proposed “a permanent, broad-scale federal
48 assistance program” to do so.

49 In fact, Congress has never covered the full cost of this
50 mandate and has covered less and less of the costs of such
51 education year by year. In Vermont those costs are now covered
52 at the supervisory union level, which now prevents any student
53 from outside our supervisory union from tuitioning into Marlboro
54 Elementary even if they want to, as they have in the past.

55 The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provided
56 educational funds while imposing a measurement of student
57 outcomes by standardized testing that presumed a national
58 agreement on what constitutes a good education and how to
59 recognize it. No such agreement exists, and in 2015, the Every
60 Child Succeeds Act dumped the responsibility for administering
61 standards back to the states, but with sharply reduced funding.

62 The current administration in Washington has cut the
63 funding at the supervisory union level still further, by some
64 \$700,000, requiring an additional tax contribution from Marlboro
65 just this year of just under \$107,000.

66 * * *

67 AT THE STATE LEVEL, consider Act 46, which in 2015
68 consolidated educational funding, supposedly to save money and
69 to improve funding for small schools in towns with an inadequate
70 tax base.

71 The policy was sold to us mostly on the strength of the
72 issue of fairness for those small towns, and we supported it for
73 that reason, despite doubts about the loss of control over our own
74 spending.

75 The state imposed a funding formula for which it had no
76 data, promising to gather the data to make the tax rates equitable.
77 It did not gather that data for years, and when it did, it found that
78 the formula had imposed disproportionate costs on small
79 districts. It did nothing to compensate the disadvantaged towns.

80 Act 46 also encouraged, rather forcefully, the
81 consolidation of school districts, cutting the number of districts
82 (the number of school boards) by more than half. The touted
83 savings did not appear. Rather, both the cost per pupil and the
84 overall cost of public elementary education in Vermont rose
85 substantially, with around 10% of that rise contributing nothing
86 to actual education; it went to increased student transportation.

87 Here in Marlboro we chose not to consolidate with
88 neighboring districts and chose, rather, to maintain autonomy
89 and control of our local school.

90 * * *

91 THROUGH THE HEIGHT of the Covid pandemic, Gov. Scott
92 was probably the best governor in the country, listening to expert
93 advice, explaining both what he knew and what he did not,
94 while publicly answering questions from all comers.

95 Unfortunately, he seems determined not to do any of that
96 for education. His concern about education seems to arise almost
97 entirely over its cost.

98 Gov. Scott selected a secretary of education with no
99 experience in public schools, whose appointment was rejected
100 overwhelmingly by the Vermont Senate, whereupon he appointed
101 her anyway.

102 Which brings us to the current legislative folly of Act 73,
103 through which Gov. Scott is trying once again to impose district
104 consolidation, an idea so bad that the very people the governor
105 appointed to propose its implementation told him it was
106 unworkable.

107 When he learned that small schools are not generally
108 more expensive on a per-pupil basis, he abandoned the argument
109 for consolidation as money-saving in favor of an unsupported and
110 vague claim that it would be more equitable.

111 Vermont's families need and deserve better.

112 * * *

113 NEARLY EVERY discussion I have had about the problems
114 with education has had almost nothing to say about actual

115 education. We talk about state and federal requirements,
116 population forecasts, tax rates, and deficits, and I have tried to
117 address some of these concerns here.

118 As others have pointed out, the long-term tax
119 consequences of closing a school are by no means certain, and it
120 seems likely that without a school, the value of property in
121 Marlboro will only diminish.

122 I believe that without arbitrary requirements from the
123 state our school board and our teachers can figure out how to run
124 an excellent small school. The issues we're facing are not new,
125 and Marlboro and its school board have a long and strong history
126 of advocating for what's right for our children, in this small rural
127 community.

128 Of course there will be things that a very small school
129 does not do, but by the same token there are also things that only
130 small schools can do well.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

131 **T. HUNTER WILSON** is a former member of the
132 Marlboro School Board and for 47 years a teacher of writing and
133 literature at Marlboro College.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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LINKS:

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135

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VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

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####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

137

####END LOGLINE####