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Notes from editor (not for publication):

This reads really nicely, G. Thank you.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Bill seeks move from forced school districts to shared
2 services

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3 Legislators hearing public concerns regarding Act 73, an
4 education reform bill that's passed the House and is making its
5 way through the Senate

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

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7 Vermont lawmakers and community members gathered
8 April 25 at Brattleboro Union High School to discuss a sweeping
9 education reform proposal that could significantly reshape how
10 schools are funded and governed across the state.

11 The discussion took place during an informational
12 meeting hosted by the Windham Southeast School District
13 (WSESD) and Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU)
14 that drew an audience seeking clarity on what could become one
15 of the most consequential education reforms in Vermont in recent
16 years.

17 The bill under discussion, known as [H.955](#), would move
18 Vermont away from controversial forced school district mergers
19 under Act 73 and instead require all districts to join regional
20 Collaborative Service Agencies (CSAs), also called Cooperative
21 Education Service Agencies (CESAs).

22 These entities would allow districts to share services such
23 as special education, mental health support, transportation, and
24 administrative functions, with the goal of reducing costs and
25 improving efficiency.

26 Supporters say the proposal reflects a broader effort to
27 address longstanding inequities in both educational opportunities
28 and property tax burdens.

29 State Rep. Emilie Kornheiser, D-Brattleboro, said the bill
30 has been a “multiyear legislative priority,” despite generating
31 “really hot headlines” and being “quite politically divisive.”

32 It originated in a legislative session “that was also filled
33 with conversations about education reform and the need for
34 change within the state, both to our property tax system and
35 educational opportunities for kids,” she told attendees, calling the
36 process to date “thoughtful and deliberate.”

37 **Political divide emerges**

38 Despite broad interest in reform, lawmakers
39 acknowledged a growing divide between state leaders.

40 The House has passed a version of the bill centered on
41 voluntary, locally driven collaboration. Meanwhile, the Senate is
42 weighing a plan that would allow voluntary efforts initially but
43 could impose mergers after two years.

44 Adding to the tension, Gov. Phil Scott has threatened to
45 veto state budget and property tax legislation if it does not
46 include a forced merger provision.

47 Legislators at the meeting warned that such a move
48 could trigger a government shutdown and harm the state's
49 financial standing.

50 The Vermont School District Redistricting Task Force
51 reports show "forced mergers in rural areas do not lead to the
52 outcomes or the cost savings that is being alleged by the
53 administration," said state Sen. Nader Hashim, D-Windham.

54 "The timing of this forum is really interesting to me
55 because, over the next two weeks, a lot of things may change and
56 the decisions that are made in the Senate over the next few
57 weeks are really going to impact how this bill moves forward,"
58 said Hashim, who also supports the CSA concept.

59 **Shift in how schools are** 60 **funded**

61 At the heart of H.955 is a proposed foundation formula
62 that would shift key budget decisions from local voters to the
63 state. Under this model, the state would determine a per-pupil
64 funding level based on student needs.

65 Local school boards would still decide how to spend that
66 money, but voters would weigh in only if districts seek to exceed
67 the state's spending level — capped at 5% above the base
68 amount.

69 Lawmakers said the change is designed to create more
70 consistency and equity across districts while maintaining some
71 degree of local control.

72 The legislation also proposes a multiyear overhaul of
73 Vermont's property tax system. A central feature is the creation of
74 a new tax category for second homes, with revenue intended to
75 reduce homestead property taxes.

76 Officials said the broader reform targets key cost drivers
77 in the education system, including health care, special education,
78 mental health services, facilities, and class sizes.

79 **Concerns about local impact**

80 Community members raised concerns about how the
81 changes could affect school choice, teacher contracts, and local
82 school culture.

83 Under the proposal, public funding for school choice
84 would be limited to Vermont-based schools that meet certain size
85 requirements.

86 While current students would be allowed to remain in
87 their chosen schools through graduation, future options could be
88 restricted, particularly in smaller towns such as Vernon.

89 There were also questions about how communities
90 would navigate the transition period, with some residents worried
91 that students could lose opportunities before the long-term goals
92 of greater equity are realized.

93 The discussion also turned to concerns about hazing,
94 harassment, and bullying in schools, with advocates describing
95 the issue as widespread and serious.

96 Lawmakers suggested that larger, more collaborative
97 systems could help create safer and more inclusive environments
98 by increasing diversity and improving access to staff training and
99 resources.

100 However, they emphasized that local school boards
101 would retain immediate responsibility for ensuring student safety.

102 **Balancing efficiency and local** 103 **control**

104 While H.955 promotes shared services and regional
105 coordination, it does not mandate district mergers. Instead,
106 communities would be encouraged to explore governance

107 changes through local study committees, with final decisions left
108 to voters.

109 Still, tensions remain over how to balance efficiency with
110 local autonomy. Lawmakers stressed the importance of
111 accountability and long-term evaluation to ensure the reforms
112 deliver on their promises.

113 During discussion, opposition to Act 73 dominated and
114 criticism focused on lack of evidence, loss of local control, and
115 how poorly it would fit rural Vermont.

116 Supportive arguments were more indirect, emphasizing
117 equity, efficiency, and expanded opportunities — goals that some
118 believe mergers could help achieve, but others think can be
119 reached through collaboration instead.

120 Arguments against Act 73 included a lack of evidence
121 that they work in rural areas. The only cited success cases were in
122 large urban settings — for example, in Philadelphia.

123 Opponents also cited the risk to local control and
124 community voice, saying forced mergers take decision-making
125 away from local voters and school boards.

126 A preference was expressed for voluntary, locally driven
127 governance decisions rather than state-imposed structures. Also
128 noted were that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't fit Vermont
129 and that consolidation could undermine small schools that serve
130 as community anchors.

131 Finally, concerns were raised about instability during
132 transition periods and uncertainty about outcomes with
133 skepticism that mergers would actually address core issues,
134 including costs, equity, or student experience.

135 Fewer speakers explicitly endorsed forced mergers
136 outright, but several raised points that align with arguments often
137 used in favor of consolidation, i.e., concerns about not merging.

138 They included the need for greater scale to expand
139 opportunities and, notably, more programs that smaller districts
140 may struggle to offer independently. They included career and

141 technical education (CTE), extracurriculars and athletics, and
142 broader academic options.

143 A central theme was that Vermont currently has unequal
144 access to resources and programs depending on location and that
145 larger or more unified systems could help ensure more consistent
146 educational quality statewide.

147 High-cost areas such as special education and health
148 care were highlighted, and some suggested larger systems may
149 better manage shared costs.

150 Finally, some mused that larger, more diverse student
151 populations could reduce social isolation for minority students
152 and improve school climate and inclusivity.

153 A multi-year process

154 “This legislation is step three in a multi-year process,”
155 Kornheiser wrote in a recent press release. “And frankly, that is
156 hard to do in a biennial legislature with a divided government.”

157 The bill is currently in the Senate, and legislators
158 anticipate negotiations with the governor.

159 “This legislation is complex by necessity: We are
160 addressing a wide range of large and small details here,”
161 Kornheiser said. “I encourage you to ask questions if you have
162 any concerns about how it might impact your family or our
163 community.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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