

## **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 and looking at the big picture 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 sy6

- 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 shou-152.5 (h)62.5