

Comments
Expanding Opportunity in the Digital Age

DANTE RAMOS

Oh, Belmont! Local control fetish hurts vocational schools



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF.FILE 2015

Technology camp at Minuteman High School.



By Dante Ramos | GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 11, 2016

CONGRATULATIONS, BELMONT. YOU'VE made a mess that could hamper the education of kids in your community and a bunch of others. And you've shown how, in a state that fetishizes local control, individual towns end up sabotaging bigger goals that elevate entire regions.

Belmont is one of 16 towns, all to the north and west of Boston, with a say over Minuteman High School, a regional vocational-technical school that offers top-notch programs in areas such as hospitality, horticulture, environmental science, and robotics.

Even in fancy suburbs where parents steer teens toward the Ivy League, not the skilled trades, there are students who benefit from specialized technical programs that individual towns can't easily provide. Minuteman, the so-called "Harvard of vocational high schools," draws about 600 students, including a substantial number from nonmember towns. Yet it operates in a 1970s-era building in Lexington that, by all accounts, needs extensive remodeling — or should be replaced entirely.

After running the numbers, and getting a commitment of up to \$44 million from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, Minuteman is seeking a new building. Fifteen of the 16 towns have gone along. But the idea fails if any of the member towns opposes it. In May, members of Belmont's town meeting voted 141-81 to reject it.

Minuteman's school committee then moved on to Plan B: a Sept. 20 popular vote, to be held in 16 towns at the school's expense. Voters would be shortsighted to turn the measure down, but who knows what'll happen?

The thing is, Belmontonians' objections to the Minuteman proposal were strikingly mild. "Let me just say, this is a close call," said Mark Paolillo, the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, according to [a Wicked Local account of the vote](#). "I am against this building, not because [the existing one] doesn't need to be renovated, but I believe it's the wrong building at the wrong time."

As it happens, the town is looking nervously at other looming big-ticket expenses, including a major renovation of Belmont High. Sadly, because people in one town were kinda sorta not quite ready, Minuteman's future is up in the air.

In the nation's higher-ed hotbed, we [undervalue hands-on vocational programs](#) — which, by the way, can also be a path to a four-year college. Yet the wrangling over Minuteman also highlights a broader problem with how Massachusetts is run. The state's 351 local governments exert tremendous power that they guard jealously. Still, as the cost and complexity of government grow, some problems — from public health to emergency management to the provision of specialized vocational programs — prove [too big for many towns to handle on their own](#).

So we end up with fragile coalitions like the Minuteman regional district. Satisfying 16 local governments takes a kind of gymnastics that not even [Simone Biles](#) could execute.

Indeed, the wrangling over a new building is pulling the Minuteman district apart. Because state rules are a little screwy, member towns that assume a share of a vocational school's costs may pay more per student than nonmember towns that send students on a tuition basis. That [helps explain](#)

why six of the 16 towns involved in the upcoming election already have plans to leave the Minuteman district. (At least they didn't try, while heading for the door, to veto the new building.)

It's wrong to take what ought to be a long-term educational alliance and cast it in strictly transactional terms. Listen to Dover resident Ford Spalding, who sits on the Minuteman school committee and is leading the campaign for a new facility. His town, he says, sends only two students to the school. Still, he argues, "if we send the kid, we should be supporting that kid. That's our obligation."

In Belmont and a few other towns, skeptics have urged Minuteman to downsize instead of putting up a new 628-student school. But cutting the number of specialized programs isn't in any child's best interest. As college students nationwide graduate with high debts but without clear goals, the allure of a focused, high-quality technical education will only grow.

Massachusetts needs schools like Minuteman. Lawmakers have to provide enough carrots and sticks to keep multi-town districts together — and limit the damage that lone holdouts can do. In the meantime, voters in the 16 towns ought to look realistically at the issue before them. As Arlington Town Manager Adam Chapdelaine puts it, building a new school "might not be the best perfect-world option but is most likely the best real-world option."

Ultimately, any public project, from the lowliest road repair on up to a spiffy new vocational school, requires a certain leap of faith. Voters shouldn't let that scare them — even in Belmont.

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