

[Eaton: A young family's decision: Why choose Vermont?](#)

by [Opinion](#) | February 15, 2012

Editor's note: This op-ed is by Christopher Eaton, a Weybridge resident who grew up in Middlebury. He is a partner of Campaign for Vermont. <http://campaignforvermont.org/>

This is not an opinion piece arguing or debating the details of how to improve Vermont's education system. This is the short simplified story of my family, and our joy, angst and reservations about deciding to raise our children in Vermont. I realize this is not everyone's story, and I want to stress that there is only one reason I would share my family's story in a public forum, and that is because many families like mine are struggling with the same decisions about their children's future.

Although not everyone comes to live in Vermont in the same way, I know that our route resembles that of many people who would like to make Vermont their home as well. There are many prospective Vermont families who must debate if the sacrifices they make outweigh the benefits of living in Vermont. I want what is best for my family, and I want what is best for Vermont. I speak out only to encourage Vermonters to join the conversation about our state's future, and to look closely at the realities of our challenges as a community.

I was born in Vermont and educated in the public system from kindergarten through high school, continuing on to attend an in-state college as well. Over the intervening years I have lived in and out of the state, met my wife, married her in Massachusetts, and recently moved back to raise our children in the state that we both love. As with any of life's big decisions, we have had many discussions about raising our children in Vermont. And even though we love it here, and we are firmly settled, we still have some reservations that we continue to discuss. Inevitably we return to the topic of education.

There are a few things that we know won't change wherever we choose to live. We believe that the most important factor in any child's education is their parents or guardians. We feel that a school's culture has a lot to do with its quality of education. If a school puts a priority on excellence and encourages its students to be the best they can be, then those students are off to a great start. We recognize that every kid is different, and what works well for one may not work as well for another.

So we ask ourselves: What is the culture of our Vermont schools? Will our children be encouraged by their teachers and classmates to reach their highest potential? Is there an emphasis

on cultivating a love of learning? Is there a diversity of school choice where our children can be educated?

I think Vermont has a good public education system. But I also say that when it comes to education, “good” isn’t good enough. We can always do better. And I would argue that Vermont must do better. The fact is our state has many practical reasons why young families can’t or don’t want to move here. Frankly, Vermont’s education system must be a selling point to encourage young families to choose Vermont. We can’t afford for public education to be a negative factor.

We have legitimate reason to be concerned about the future of education in Vermont. Currently nearly two-thirds of Vermont 11th graders test below proficient in math, and over 50 percent test below proficient in writing. We have an aging population and dwindling school enrollment. In the past decade, Vermont has had a stranglehold on the lowest birth rate in the nation. The importance of these facts can’t be overstated. This is an unsustainable path, both for our economy and our public education system.

I don’t pretend to know the solutions to the many challenges facing Vermont. But what I do know is that the state of Vermont is not doing enough to meet these challenges head on. And without proper attention, I fear that 10 years from now my family, and many others like mine, will not be living in Vermont.