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Editor
Bennington Banner

Dear Editor,

I do not support privatizing the North Bennington Graded School.

The Prudential Committee asserts there is a financial crisis due to declining enrollment, causing per pupil costs to be too high. The Committee fears that the School District will be subject to the State's financial penalty if the School's per pupil costs exceed the State's Excess Spending Threshold.

There is no crisis looming and the Commissioner of Education said there is no plan to close the Graded School. For FY 2011, the State reported the NBS's per pupil costs were \$11,827, somewhat higher than the State average of \$10,321. The State's Excess Spending Threshold for FY 2011 was \$14,549. Our School would have to increase per pupil spending by 23% to reach the Excess Spending Threshold. NBGS is not close to being penalized, or closed.

Sending children to the proposed Village School of North Bennington, will cost our School District more than what we presently pay to educate our children. The Village School asserts it is modeled after the Mountain School in Winhall. The Vermont School Boards Association studied the Mountain School's finances and reported the Mountain School's per pupil costs were 20% higher than its public school counterparts.

The Village School alleges that it can do private fundraising to keep tuition costs down. The Commissioner's legal counsel stated that there is no law prohibiting public schools from engaging in fundraising. A public school can do the same fundraising a private school can do. NGBS has received grants and gifts of money in the past and can do so going forward. The private school has not raised any of its own money to date. The Village School has relied on the financial resources of our School District to support its efforts. The Village School could raise money now, to support itself and to prepare for the opening of its school, but has chosen not to do so.

Currently, NBGS receives money from the State that are only public school districts that operate a school are eligible to receive. The Village School will not be eligible for these State grants. Once NBGS is closed, the NBGS School District will lose its eligibility for these State grants.

If NBGS is closed and pays tuition to the Village School, our School District can still be assessed a penalty for exceeding the State's Excess Spending Threshold. According to the Commissioner's legal counsel, a school district cannot exempt itself by closing its school and paying tuition to other schools.

The private school argues that it will be able to attract new students and increase enrollment. Vermont law does not allow school choice for elementary school. Consequently, the surrounding school districts will not be paying tuition for the children in their districts to attend the Village School. The only children who could attend are those whose parents who can afford the full tuition, about \$12,000 per child per year.

If NBGS begins paying tuition for children in the District to attend school, those children will be able to select other approved private schools. Pine Cobble, Long Trail and Maple Street Schools charge tuition between \$14,000 and \$18,000. Families that cannot afford \$14,000 now may be able to pay \$2,000 if our School District is paying the rest. As the Winhall School District experienced, families elected to send their children to other public and private schools, outside the district. The result, the Village School's per pupil costs will be higher than NBGS' per pupil costs.

The Village School has sought State approval to provide only 3 out of 12 types of special education services. This means that if your child needs special education services in one of the 9 areas that the Village School is not approved, your child would have to leave the NBGS District to get those services.

The 5-year Tuition Agreement our Prudential Committee signed with the Village School Trustees does not require the Village School to provide special education services in all 12 areas or serve all children in the District, now and into the future. The Prudential Committee says that the Village School will assess a child's needs and provide the child with the required special education services. This is simply not true. The Village School must receive prior approve from the State before it can provide a particular special education service. The Village School must also get prior approval for its special education fees. The Village School may be able to assess a child, but it will not be able to provide special education services or charge for those services without first obtaining approval from the State.

Parents should not be put in the position of having to decide between attending the Village School and NOT getting the special education services the child needs, or leaving the School District to assure the child's needs are met.

Finally, by closing NBGS, every citizen in the School District will lose his and her voice in the governance of the Graded School. The Village School has opted to have a self-selected board of trustees. While you may know some of those serving on the board today, you will have no voice in the future leadership and policies of the Village School. The role of the Prudential Committee

Letter to Editor
January 1, 2013
Page3

will be reduced to that of tax collector, and only that, if NBGS is closed.

There is a value in public education that is unique. Public school policy is set by the community's elected officials, who are chosen by the entire community.

I believe the Graded School has been a success for the children of our community because the Prudential Committee has been accountable to the voters, not just to parents. The voters can hold its school officials accountable at every election and at every budget vote. We will lose something very special about our community and School if the voters permit the Prudential Committee to close the Graded School.

Sincerely,

Lon McClintock
Resident of the North Bennington School District