

Montgomery School Choice - Michael Bimm

Hello. My name is Michael Bimm and I am a parent attending today from the town of Montgomery in Franklin county. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding school choice.

My family moved to Vermont in 2008. At the same time I also moved my software engineering business to this state. We previously lived near Atlanta Georgia and before that in Northern California. The main reason we moved to Vermont was to provide better educational choices for our two children. We saw the clear differences in education between the states and Vermont came out near or at the top each year. Once we decided on Vermont we examined all the elementary schools, public and independent, and decided to move to the small rural town of Montgomery.

Montgomery elementary is a public school and consistently one of the top performing elementary schools in the state. It also has one of the lowest per pupil education spending costs in the state. I believe this to be a direct result of the parent and community involvement, the responsive local school board, and the excellent teachers and staff. I guess you could say this was our family's first 'school choice' and it involved a 1200 mile move. Needless to say, education is important to us.

As our oldest son, Alexander, reached grade 7 we began to examine our next major educational decision, namely 'High School'. Montgomery does not have a local public high school and tuitions students in grades 9 through 12 for secondary education. As of the latest Town School District report there were 49 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Just by examining the latest report we can see that Montgomery students have attended at least 7 different public and independent high schools and career centers over the last 4 years.

We examined all the choices and spoke to other families about their kids and the choices they had made. What was immediately clear is that there was no one size fits all. Let me highlight some of the choices and some of the positives of each school choice:

> Enosburg Falls High School is located in the adjacent town and is the current choice of 27 students (or 55%). This is a public secondary school and has many great attributes, not limited to:

- Excellent Athletics Programs
  - At this point I would be remiss if I didn't highlight the Enosburg Lady Hornets, 2016 Division 3 Girls Basketball State Champions.
- Dual Enrollment/Early College Courses
  - Dual enrollment offers students an opportunity to check out a University, earn both high school and college credit, and work towards their personalized learning goals.
- Strong local community involvement programs and local family connections to the school

> North Country Union High School on the other hand is not in the adjacent town. It is located in Newport about 50 miles away. This is also a public secondary school and the current choice of 7 student (or 14%).

- Unique Athletics Programs
  - Football is a big draw since few other schools offer this sport.
- Unique Arts Programs
  - A few students pursue the strong Drama program offered at North Country.

> Stanstead College is an independent school and is tied with North Country as the second most chosen option currently with 7 students from Montgomery (or 14%). Next year it looks like this number will grow to at least 10 students from Montgomery.

This school was my son, Alexander's choice. Alexander currently attends Stanstead College (in Stanstead Quebec). He is in grade 10 as a day student and is at the top of his class in grades, He is looking forward to completing his high school years at Stanstead and going on to university to pursue a career in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics).

## Montgomery School Choice - Michael Bimm

Our family's choice to attend Stanstead school was primarily due to three reasons; graduation rates, STEM focused curriculum and diversity.

### Graduation Rates

- I believe that a post-secondary education is critical to success in today's economy. I have worked in technology for almost 20 years and without a post-secondary education employment is essentially non-existent in this field. Stanstead College provides a rigorous academic program to prepare students for college. In fact the latest post-secondary enrollment rate (within 16 months) is 100%.

### STEM

- STEM careers have the lowest unemployment rates and project the most new demand for employees in the future. Alexander has worked hard to excel in science and mathematics and we encourage him to challenge himself to continue to improve. Alexander placed first in both the Grade 9 and Grade 10 science fairs and at Stanstead he has the opportunity to compete each year in an international mathematics competition.

### Diversity

- The workplace is increasingly competitive and increasingly diverse. Alexander attends school with students from all over the world. In fact, 22 different countries). He is able to learn to respect their cultures while they learn about Vermont through him.

Although we have to cross the border each day to Canada, Stanstead has very close ties to Vermont. In fact, just last week President Obama used the following example to illustrate the relationship between the two countries, when he said:

"And up where Derby Line, Vermont, meets Stanstead, Quebec, Americans and Canadians come together at the local library where the border line literally runs right across the floor," the president said. "A resident of these border towns once said we are two countries, but like one big town and people are always there for you."

Vermont shares a close relationship with our neighboring states and provinces, especially Quebec, that greatly benefits Vermont and brings in visitors and funds from out of state and out of country.

> St. Johnsbury Academy is an independent school and the current choice of 2 Montgomery students (or 4%).

- Being an Engineer myself I was impressed by the Engineering courses and hands on Maker labs

- One of the parents recently shared the reason they chose St. Johnsbury. She said, 'St. J has an incredibly rich curriculum and offerings that are not available at our local high schools. The language and arts programs are unmatched anywhere in the state. Their STEM curriculum is exemplary. They have a culinary program which I would love for my daughter to take advantage of as she wants to be a chef, but will not be able to if we lose choice.'

> Other high school choices include:

Richford High School: 3 (6%)

BFA: 2 (4%)

Lamoille Union High School: 1 (2%)

> Montgomery students also attend a few different career centers, including:

Cold Hollow Career Center

- where they take courses like Automotive Technology, Forestry and

Natural Resources and many other career training programs

North Country Career Center

Green Mountain Technology and Career

So in summary we have:

- 49 unique students

- attending at least 7 different public and independent schools

- pursuing courses and programs that meet their individual strengths and goals

- roughly 60% public adjacent town schools, 20% public longer distance schools and 20% independent schools

## Montgomery School Choice - Michael Bimm

The numbers and percentages of students making a specific choice fluctuates over time as each new group of students reach grade 8. Also students sometimes move from one choice school to another because their interests change, they want a more challenging course load, or for any number of other personal reasons. For example, next year two students will move from Enosburg to Stanstead to join with their third sibling starting in grade 9. Often times choices within a family are not uniform. One family I know had one student in Stanstead, one in North Country and two in Enosburg. They value school choice and the ability for their kids to attend the high school they believed was best for them.

In conclusion, school choice and tuitioning has been providing personalized learning and flexible pathways to our Montgomery secondary students for many years. No single school can fit every individual student. You would end up with a program a mile wide and an inch deep.

I am proud my son is a science and math super geek who loves public speaking, debate, and the swim team. He is unique and he has chosen the school that feeds his passions. Now my second son has reached grade 7 and my family will discuss again what pathway he will follow and what school choice he will make.

One parent expressed that the act of having to make a choice in grade 8 forces students to begin thinking about their future in middle school and prepares them for the choice they will make 4 years later for college.

Montgomery is facing a tough choice on unification in early June and as you know school choice plays a role in that debate. Our last town school meeting was quite lively to say the least. I believe if you asked the parents and students in Montgomery you will find that they are happy with school choice and happy with the choices they have made, both public and independent. I was happy I didn't need to move my family and business another 1200 miles to find the best high school for my son's path.

I focused my comments today on the positives. I do not believe this issue is about public v.s. private, in-state v.s. out of state, rich v.s. poor. It is about individual students choosing the best educational pathway to their individual goals.

Thank you for your time and your thoughtful consideration regarding this issue and I appreciate your listening to my family's view on this matter. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss this issue further.