

Carol Brigham 4/22/15

April, 2015

Dear Senators of the Education Committee,

I have been a Whiting School Board member for 22 years and a member of the RNESU board for nearly as many. Whiting is a small town with only about 400 residents. Twenty years ago it was considered a "property poor town". For me this was hard to see, because Whiting has rich farm lands, swamp lands that are full of wildlife and some of the most beautiful views of the Green, Taconic and Adirondack Mountains in the state. It doesn't have mountain peaks, lakes, or tourist attractions. Its largest employer, besides one or two large farms, is our community school. The people of Whiting are proud, practical and resourceful. The Whiting Elementary School reflects our community and our community supports our school. I would like to share our school mission: *The Whiting Elementary School supports each student's social and academic growth as a self-directed learner. Our school reflects local traditions and connections to the global community. We value the past; embrace the opportunities and challenges of the present, while preparing healthy, contributing individuals for the future.*

Whiting is part of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union. RNESU has a long history of across the SU collaboration and education equity even with our 9 boards (43 members) and 7 schools which include one UHS, one joint K-8 school and five K-6 schools. We have been continually told that we are a model in the state in how we collaborate. We have a shared vision for our schools and are committed to provide exceptional learning opportunities and positive outcomes for our students, while still having our individual local identity. Four years ago, we were one of the few SUs that met their goal budget reduction for "Challenges for Change". Three years ago, with just a few adjustments; we were in compliance with "Virtual Merger" requirements of Act 153. We have been negotiating SU wide teacher contract since 1977; consolidated special education cost since the early 1980's; consolidated universal pre-k by 1998 and transportation in 2005. We also share the common support positions of technology coordinator and math and literacy coaches. We bid out our lunch program together and have recently agreed to combine our resources for an energy efficient program on lighting in our schools. On top of all of the above Whiting and Sudbury share a part time principal who organizes many across district collaborations. We are also in the process of conducting a survey through the Castleton Polling Institute on what our two communities see in our school/education future.

I totally contribute these successes to the collective great leadership of all our board members and administrators. I also want to note that very few of our collaborations were accomplished quickly or without deep commitment and hard work. Ownership of a decision leads to its success.

The *Brigham* Decision determined that the state was responsible for educating its students and triggered a change in Vermont school funding that removed labels from our communities in regards to being a "gold" or "poor" town. This is one of my favorite quotes: *"The distribution of a resource as precious as educational opportunity may not have as its determining force the mere fortuity of a child's residence."* Brigham vs. Vermont (1997). It was unfortunate that a young child from a property poor town needed to go to court and challenge the state to prove that our old school funding system was wrong. It is also unfortunate that now that the state has had to recognize this; many feel the need to

continue to create legislation, when all we need is sound leadership and ample support from the state mainly through the Agency of Education, not legislation that dismantles our communities.

I encourage you, as you look at legislation that affects our children and community schools, do not label us and do not create unneeded upheaval. Equity, efficiency, and quality need to be addressed along with our community's values and capacity. The Agency of Education needs the appropriate resources to support our school communities in positive changes to our systems and sufficient time is needed.

I will leave you with one more quote:

"Much of what passes for school reform is superficial and ultimately fails because the difficulty of the task—institutional change—is underestimated. Real change can only come as a result of the commitments of both the minds and the hearts of the total school community—teachers, parents, students, administrators and school boards. Reform should be based on careful identification of deeply and commonly held values. Change can only be achieved through people's acceptance of responsibility to further their goals through their words and their actions"

Thomas Sergiovanni, in his book, "Building Community Schools" quotes Irwin Blumer, school superintendent in Newton, Mass. (1992)

Thank you,

Carol Brigham

Whiting, VT
