

Hello, my name is Neil Odell and I'm a school board member serving on the Norwich School Board, the Dresden Interstate School board (with Hanover NH) and also a member of the VSBA Board of Directors. I've been a member of our Negotiations teams on both sides of the Connecticut River since I joined the board over 8 years ago. Thank you for allowing me the time to talk to you today about the possibility of a statewide teacher's healthcare contract.

I was very happy to hear that the Vermont NEA was interested in pursuing a statewide teacher's healthcare contract. I feel that it represents a great step forward towards a system, that if done correctly, could provide stable, predictable, high quality healthcare to teachers and support staff across the entire state while also providing taxpayers with potential savings now and well into the future.

And it was my experience at the negotiations table, particularly last year that helped to coalesce my thoughts on this matter. Last night, while I was preparing my remarks for today, I did a quick search on my emails related to our negotiations last year. The entire process ran just over a year. It started with negotiations training sessions, continued with webinars on HRAs, HSAs and health plans and included countless meetings with our business administrator as we poured over a myriad of options and permutations. Over 300 emails that included the subject of "negotiations" and easily hundreds of hours spent reviewing and discussing healthcare details. And this doesn't include the money spent on legal fees as both our teacher and support staff negotiations went first to impasse and then to fact finding before finally coming to resolution. And Norwich is a small district – a single K-6 elementary school. Consider that same process playing out in districts across the state last year and you begin to understand the effort that went into a single aspect of bargaining.

I wish I could have spent at least part of that time on revisiting our long-range plan. On policies that needed review. On student learning.

I believe that we – School Boards – and the Vermont NEA agree on the fundamentals. That a state-wide teacher healthcare contract is good for teachers and for Vermont taxpayers. Where we may differ is on the details.

Let's not dismiss VEHI. It has served school districts extraordinarily well for over 20 years. The issues that some school districts are experiencing related to the transition to new health care plans has nothing to do with VEHI. It has to do with the complex variabilities in negotiated settlements in Vermont. It has to do with an HRA vendor that promised more than they could deliver. In Norwich, every interaction we've had with VEHI has been exemplary. They've been professional, knowledgeable, courteous and timely. Even in the thick of the plan transition.

Let's also acknowledge the risk assumed by VEHI and ensure that board representation adequately reflects the ownership of that risk. It's the employer, the school districts, that bear the financial risk for VEHI. Employees can, and do have a voice in the existing VEHI board structure.

Let's also acknowledge that if we're going to bargain at the state level it should be between school board members and teachers. Let the folks with "skin in the game" actually play in the game.

I believe we – you the legislature, my colleagues and I on Vermont School Boards and the teachers of the Vermont NEA – have the opportunity to do the right thing for taxpayers, teachers and support staff in this state. But let's not throw away what is already working. Let's build upon what we have and do the right thing for Vermonters.

