

My name is Sigrid Olson. This August (2019) will mark my 14th year as an employee of the Vermont Agency of Education. I was hired in 2005 as the first social studies specialist employed by the Agency after a 16-year gap. Over the years I've held 2 other roles - technology integrationist and personalized learning specialist. Before that, I worked for The Vermont Institutes under a contract from the AOE. In total, I've worked for 5 commissioners or secretaries and at least 8 different direct supervisors.

I want to thank you for inviting "rank and file" AOE employees to speak to you today. I sincerely hope it is because you have seen the clear data about the incredibly high turnover rate we have been struggling with for years, and not just because we happen to recently have two division directors who left the Agency at the same time. It's ironic - at a recent division meeting we were told that "people were grieving" about these two directors leaving, and that replacing them would be like trying to "replace a unicorn." In my 14 years at the AOE, I've never heard similar language used about one of my colleagues - and I've probably known hundreds at this point - who made the hard decision to give up work they loved and leave. These losses have also made people grieve, and many of these colleagues - while I wouldn't necessarily classify them as "unicorns" - were some of the best and brightest.

Employee turnover and morale has been a constant issue during my time at the AOE, and over the years employees - and the Agency itself - have tried to address it in many ways, without success. In 2009 I was part of a team of 6 people who spent 4 months interviewing over 100 AOE employees, analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, and producing a Business Process Management Report that included specific recommendations to improve AOE morale and output. Instead of acting on the findings, two days after this report was released our team was brought into the Commissioners office and told our work was sub-par and our research was questioned. The report was shelved, never to be looked at again or used to improve the department. The project leader, a whip-smart, hard-working colleague full of integrity who the AOE should have actually promoted to a leadership position, found another job and left within a month.

Over the years other attempts have been made to improve morale, turnover, working conditions, and productivity at the AOE. These employee-driven attempts have included starting two Labor Management Committees (LMCs) in conjunction with the VSEA and developing a mentoring program for fellow workers. Before a move to Barre, a group of us researched the environmental background of the building site and conducted meetings with the head of BGS. In addition, we organized employee meetings with the Barre Chief of Police and Mayor to address our concerns.

I was a member of our first LMC, which was created some time around 2013. We asked management for two things: 1) to create a joint committee to study increased telework opportunities, like those available in other agencies, and 2) to create a joint committee to study a more robust feedback and goal-setting process, which are also in place at other agencies. Under our contract, management is only obligated to meet with Labor Management Committees

for 6 months and are not obligated to initiate any of their recommendations. Unfortunately, the LMC's recommendations were not supported by management and were not implemented. These issues are still major concerns today.

After hitting roadblock after roadblock, I stepped back from trying to help the Agency become a better place to work. I'm a single mom of two school-aged children and had an elderly mother who was dying of Parkinson's Disease, and decided to concentrate my time where it would be most effective. But six months ago I changed my mind and decided to take on the position of VSEA Steward for the AOE, and the reason is simple: for the first time in my life, I had been systematically bullied in the workplace, and it seriously affected my mental health as well as my career path. Once I recovered from the shock and hurt, I decided that one thing I could do was try to help anyone else going through the same thing. Here it is important to understand something crucial: The VSEA non-management contract has no protections against bullying and our state has no laws against workplace bullying. Sexual harassment and harassment if you are part of a protected class, yes; bullying, no.

When I became Steward, the first initiative we took on was to analyze data from the Human Resources Employee Engagement Survey. [NOTE: This survey does not ask about bullying, although it does ask about harassment and discrimination.] A team of about 20 VSEA members analyzed the most recent data from the AOE, and wrote a report with our findings and recommendations to Secretary French. A small contingent met with the Secretary and discussed our concerns, hopes, and possible solutions. Secretary French has scheduled a series of follow-up meetings with us, and we are encouraged by his willingness to dialogue and problem solve. But along with this renewed hope comes a nagging concern: This data has been well-known to Human Resources and AOE management for years, and to my understanding or experience there has never been a concerted effort to either analyze or address it in a meaningful way.

The major findings from our analysis included the following:

- Only 50% of employees thought there is effective communication from management.
- Less than half (48%) of employees who responded feel like they can provide input to management and senior leadership.
- Less than half of employees (49%) who responded feel like they can provide input on processes.
- Only 42% of respondents agreed with the statement "morale in my department or agency is good."
- Slightly more than half (57%) of respondents feel they can "communicate honestly and openly in my workplace."
- Only 58% of respondents feel confident that any misconduct they report will be handled properly.

After analyzing and discussing this data, our 3 recommendations to the Secretary were:

1. Clarification of processes around how we communicate internally.
2. Ensure that state/agency policies and procedures and the employee contract are being followed by all employees, and are made visible.
3. Create a process to get a more accurate picture of employee performance, which includes supervisors and management.

As an example, one of the state policies that is not being followed at the AOE is the telework policy. Teleworking has been banned across the board at the AOE since as long as I've been there, even though it is not only allowed but encouraged at other agencies. Here's an example from a colleague about how teleworking - and employees - are treated at the AOE:

“One November day, a message was sent to employees on our floor that the weather was supposed to be bad the following day and that one of the directors told us ‘to make whatever decision we needed to about where to work in order to keep us safe.’ My team asked if that was for all teams or just the teams under that director. We were told that this message was for all people on this floor from all teams. My team chose to telecommute that day. The following day, my supervisor was told by our division director that our team was going to have our pay docked for working at home. In the end, this did not happen but the threat is real.”

While other state employees are saving thousands of dollars a year and maintaining their safety by telecommuting, AOE employees are being threatened with having their pay docked for doing the same thing.

After completing our initial analysis of HR data, our next goal was to survey former employees to try to add to our data collection. Again, in our opinion this is data that should be being systematically collected by Human Resources, especially in an agency with such a high turnover rate over the course of many years. To our understanding, however, this isn't being done. So when we got the invitation to testify today, we quickly threw together a survey and distributed it to former employees. We fully understand this is not a scientific survey, but we hope you'll find the results are informative anyway.

Twenty-six former employees responded to the survey within two days. Of those 26, only 14 were given the chance to have an exit interview with HR upon their departure. Of those 14, six were leaving the agency through retirement or relocation. With this in mind, we can roughly conclude that out of the 26 former employees who participated in our survey, HR only spoke with 8 who left because of frustrations with management or direction of the AOE. We wonder what has happened to that information, and why all employees leaving the AOE are not being interviewed?

The survey was simple, and asked 4 main questions: 1) Why did you leave the AOE? 2) What was the best part of working there? 3) What, if any, suggestions do you have for improving employee turnover at the AOE? and 4) Do you have any concerns about the AOE that you'd like

to share? I will only focus on two of the questions today: Why did you leave the AOE? and What suggestions to you have to improve employee turnover? Some of the answers are the following:

Why did you leave the AOE?

- Lots of travel, then distance to Barre from home. No telework policy.
- After doing this particular job (school improvement) I felt completely disempowered and disrespected. As a team we were shut out of decisions regarding changes in our roles and responsibilities.
- Always too much work and not enough resources; upper leadership turnover an issue with the assumption that yet another reorganization would solve the problem, frequent lack of consistent vision and communication among teams and upper leadership and rest of staff.
- The leadership team that had inspired and supported some truly innovative work was slowly disbanding and departing and their replacements had a different focus.
- New secretary (Holcombe) appointed, the atmosphere/culture shifted quite a bit. We stopped sponsoring many of the programs / projects that directly helped and highlighted the great work teachers are doing (Teacher of the Year), dropped the blog that we had set up with teachers and students to share their experiences / advice.
- I was frustrated by the constant restructuring of the department, lack of department willingness to working remotely even for a day or two per week. Finally, I took a pay cut to work at the AOE and upon leaving, I instantly received a 25,000 raise in my new position. That's ridiculous that we pay so little to the department that leads us. My national counterparts were making close to 30% more than me and some were making 3 TIMES my annual salary.
- Husband took a job out of state so needed to find work elsewhere. I wanted to stay in my role remotely but was told it was not possible.
- My direct division director was easily manipulated and intimidated by a fellow division director who desired to be "the ruler of all she could see" (with sincerest apologies to Dr. Seuss). It became impossible to accomplish and positive task as my DD could not make a decision without first getting approval from the intimidator. The intimidator had also surrounded herself with a group of minions who, some knowingly and others unwittingly, were not handling budgets, project oversight or record keeping correctly. When I pointed that out to my DD, I was shunned. It became impossible to do the work for which I was hired and I made the decision to leave. Shortly thereafter, the question of grant usage, contracts and reports became a major public story involving the intimidator, her right hand minion and a whistleblower employee. My DD chose to retire. I really felt vindicated. Neither the Secretary nor the Deputy, at that time, desired to deal with the issue, although the Deputy told me he knew all about it but just couldn't "mess with it" at the time. He left shortly after I did.
- The deputy treated all of us very disrespectfully.
- Complete lack of management skills from secretary and her subordinate staff of directors.
- Too much work, not enough support, poor management.

- I felt siloed. I was struggling with AOE changes, I needed to feel like my work made a difference and I wanted to work with teachers
- I was turned down for a 3rd time for a position I'd trained 2 others to perform, and I needed to work closer to home due to issues with my son.
- I have always got up to go to a job I loved. I no longer loved working for the department.
- I retired early because of personal family issues BUT I was also exhausted and discouraged from several years of challenging leadership.
- The culture of the AOE.
- Harassment, supervisor bullying, favoritism, not getting the same opportunity to advance.
- Various factors (lack of leadership; favoritism; not knowing if what I did made a difference; AOE's negative attitude towards districts) encouraged me to look elsewhere for better opportunities.
- Poor and inappropriate management.
- I used to say "I want to work in a place where people aren't crying all the time." Almost weekly I would see someone crying. Some of the managers at AOE act like they are working in a factory in the 1930s when "good employee management" meant only getting the product out on time and, if you were lucky, no one lost a limb on your watch.

What suggestions do you have to improve employee turnover?

- Having management that respects the people they supervise. Most AOE employees have master's degrees, but they are often not treated with respect.
- More flexibility with telework. Clarity of job positions.
- More respect, better communication, more interaction and understanding between divisions, a more realistic pay structure.
- Improve internal communication; increase transparency in decision making; convey respect to employees; supervise directors to assure positive climate and culture is being fostered.
- Important that upper management support employees expertise.
- Staff need doable jobs; consistent direction so they can provide consistent answers and support to the field.
- Create a pathway for advancement.
- Allow positive and appreciative processes guide practice. Create meaningful mentorship for new employees. Work on image by trusting and celebrating employees. Look for the quiet champions and seek their input.
- Listen to employees, help develop their talents, do not allow managers to bully their team, do not be afraid to put employees on performance plans (at the time, it felt like 20% of the employees did 80% of the work).
- Less micro-management.
- If you want to attract the best talent, you must pay more than you currently do. The current pay structure doesn't attract the best talent because they would reduce their income by so much. Likewise there should be either regional offices to reduce

commuting or more support for remote work days. Finally, too often promotion was around politics vs talent.

- Offer more flexibility. Other state agencies allow employees to work from home one day per week, or make it easier to work an alternative schedule. At AOE we were told those things weren't allowed. It seems hypocritical to see other agencies getting those perks. Also, some people in leadership positions need to lead better my example. When uninspired staff don't see the top leaders showing up to meetings on time or even work on time (and not because they are working elsewhere) they don't feel the need to show up and put in the work.
- More communication from leadership. More whole AOE activities. More appreciation of staff. More opportunities for telework so that they can hire good people from the south and the north. More opportunities to provide input into changes at the AOE. More support when staff aren't doing well at their job. More feedback on our work.
- There's that saying that employees do not leave jobs, they leave bad managers. That certainly has been the case at AOE. Leaders have to know how to lead. Leaders have to pick good people for their teams, not just seat fillers, and they need to support those people in doing their jobs. The day of the AOE clique needs to come to an end. If it doesn't the Agency will continue to be a revolving door of knowledgeable, hard working, dedicated people while the hangers on remain.
- Encourage and hire managers who support and trust their staff. Hire managers who know the field and are well respected by the field.
- Clear direction, better management, and improved funding.
- Trust employees to know and do their job. Supervisors come in knowing little or nothing about the program they have been asked to supervise. Micro management and changing programs (sometimes despite statutory guidelines) causes a lack of trust and confidence between the AOE and the community we are there to serve.
- Cross training to allow more opportunities for advancement and variety of work.
- 1. Require more transparency of the L-Team and work to bridge the divide between the highest levels of leadership and the rest of the organization. 2. Treat employees like they are trustworthy, capable professionals. 3. Require that all AOE employees who act in a supervisory capacity are qualified managers who periodically have to undergo training in management ethics and protocols. 4. Work harder to create an environment of respect.
- Offer professional development. Include staff at every level in decision making. Promote from within. Eliminate silos.
- To use a literary reference, "the center does not hold". The Agency is a patch work of programs and projects that do not connect with each other. I believe that the type of folks that come to work at AOE need for their sense of well being and professional support a culture that reinforces a sense of collective effort. The management culture did not while I worked at the Agency see that as an important priority. Left alone, feeling disconnected from a larger effort had a negative impact on employees and contributed to folks leaving.
- Not sure. This Agency has some of the best and the brightest. Maybe leadership training provided by an outside consulting firm.

- Supervisor accountability, supervisor training.
- Clear guidelines and responsibilities, foster respect for all, have a customer service approach to working with districts, be receptive to employee ideas and concerns, truly address serious (e.g., sexual harassment) complaints about other employees.
- Capable management.
- Management was so bad. Constantly putting unneeded obstacles to getting the work done. Constantly undermining morale.
- Management should be educated in how to support employees, to build on their strengths and to create a positive community. Positive management practices to improve employee productivity and work culture should be a priority. Additional suggestions include: Respect employees as individuals, in addition to the job they do; Provide meaningful feedback in a constructive manner on a regular basis; Don't be emotionally stingy; Ensure senior leadership models behavior that makes the rank-and-file proud to be part of the team; Provide support for employees when it's genuinely needed; honest communication; constructive feedback; recognition of achievement; support a positive and inclusive work environment.

I would like to close by saying the information presented to you today is really only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Many, many former colleagues have contacted me recently about me speaking to you today with words of support. While I'm encouraged by this, I'm also reminded that they haven't truly had a voice for many years. I'd like to leave you, for today, with these wise thoughts from a former colleague:

“Sigrid, Your comment about being bullied inspired me to speak. It is my belief that the AOE owes a heartfelt and meaningful apology to a whole lot of past and present employees. These are knowledgeable, dedicated educators who have been treated extremely badly at the hands of a poorly run operation that allowed insecure and in some cases, maniacal, leaders to abuse personnel. (Despite this) I loved working at the Agency. I miss it and hope the Agency can learn from all this and move forward in a positive manner. The administration needs to put the right people, true educational leaders, in the right places so that they in turn can fill the Agency seats with good people they can nurture and support. Those, both past and present, who have lived through the era of the ‘nutsy-cookoo’ AOE nonsense deserve to be acknowledged and thanked for what they accomplished under some of the most unusual of circumstances. If you can get that message across, the efforts of all who have gone before you will not be in vain.”

Thank you for listening. The stakes here are high; peoples' careers are on the line, and Vermont's schools are affected when the Agency of Education fails to function properly. The VSEA members at the Agency of Education are happy to share any information or data we have collected to date.

Sigrid Olson
VSEA Steward

February 27, 2019

Notes from hearing:

Dan and Heather:

Concerned about capacity of agency, system for classifying employees, see what we can do to help the people who are helping the children of Vermont.

Dan: org chart

For many federal funds, people aren't allowed to work on state activities.

Dan: part of the challenge is to keep an eye on where our funding sources come from. We are behind on school construction by about 20 years.

Dan isn't sure if our staff is sufficient right now bc we are going through restructuring.

Dan - vacancies - we have 25 vacancies and there are only 6 under active recruitment. We have more positions under recruitment, we have some job offers right now. We are now starting conversations around retention of employees. It has been a challenge to get recruitment turned around. We are having difficulty filling positions. A lot of work we do is very complex work. We need to train people so they that have the ability to take on leadership positions. It takes a while to grow these positions.

Dan - Major restructuring issues require a lot of technical expertise at the agency to lead and administer. Major policy reforms. Act 77 major restructuring - we've been working on that since 2013.

Dan - part of the issue is getting policy coherence in education. Vermont's education quality is in spite of our policies not because of them. When I say "initiative fatigue" I will get a standing ovation. Think about your role in decreasing the complexity of what we do.

People would take a 50% cut in pay to work at the AOE (school leaders). We need to think of other ways to engage people. We need people who are skilled project managers, who are skilled at convening conversations...there is tension around this idea. The agency only had one position added to implement Act 46. It doesn't work well to compete with schools for employees. It isn't allowing us to pull from broader expertise.

Heather: timing is challenging. We have year round work, and most people have contracts that expire during the summer.

What does the agency need to hire competent staff?

Dan: time. We don't need other new initiatives. We are in a rebuilding phase right now at the same time that we're trying to navigate complex policy. We have to work on retention piece as well...I don't want to lose good employees. We are working to make jobs more doable. This has been a building conversation since 2008.

Questions: Curtis Reed reminds us that there is a cohort of people of color who would be willing to move to VT if we did the outreach. Is the agency looking at this?

Dan: we don't have good internal policies and procedures - we are working on this.

Q: there is a perception that people at AOE are being paid less than people in other state agencies...is that true?

Dan: admin team has met with HR to understand how AOE's classification process - discussing how we turn classification over to HR for them to examine. Our internal reclass committee isn't working well.

Nicole Mace:

Speaking broadly for Jeff, Jay.

VSBA, VSA, VPA, Council of Special Ed Administrators

REmarks tailored to implementation of Act 173 - this is a big concern at the moment. Supporting positive learning environments for all Vermont students. The law calls for significant cultural shifts. Cultural and operational shifts must precede the change to the funding. Stakes here are very high. Time is of the essence.

Act 173 directed AOE to assist SUs to expand and improve their delivery of supports in accordance to the DMG report. How we deliver services to students and how we pay for them. Directed agency to put in place a professional learning plan - training of teachers and staff, embedding best practices.

AOE has entered into a contract with DMG, but no TA or PD learning plan was put together for this school year. \$200,000 a year was expected to be used

Some systems are further along in these changes, for other districts this is a fresh conversation. Strong recommendation to the AOE this past summer was to identify districts in greatest need and to give them PD, currently this contract has seminars that were offered as first come first serve basis, so districts who have more experience signed up first - increased gap in knowledge and practices.

3rd concern - what is the plan for delivering TA once districts are identified? Last update to advisory group looked like AOE was aligning supports between ESSA and Act 173 - that "may

make sense” but we’re asking that the agency provide evidence this does and will ensure sufficient attention paid to Act 173.

The AOE to date has not provided the level of leadership around this. This requires a clear vision for the agency.

Vacancies remain in the SPED team at the AOE. 3 positions that were created to support Act 173 have not been filled, also departure of 2 veteran members of team. 50% of the team is vacant. “This is bigger than Act 46.”

We enjoy a strong working relationship, see AOE as a critical partner, the complexity of the issues the AOE is being asked to lead on is daunting, particularly when you have leadership turnover at every level of the organization. We are concerned about their capacity to support implementation of this law and other areas.

Jeff Francis: The emphasis on hiring practices is important but not as important as policy coherence. Two important policies H.3 cultural / ethnic studies, S.40 lead in water in schools. These two bills have moved very rapidly, and it’s important to get them right. If you don’t get them right the first time through will be hard to get them right subsequently. Our intentions are to foster an understanding around policy coherence - collection of initiatives.

Jay Nichols: people in the field should be aspiring to go to the AOE, but they aren’t.

Tracy Sawyers: SPED administrators are feeling pressure that they are supposed to lead this work, but it’s not about more SPED, it’s about high quality first instruction. They want and need a vision and support from the AOE.

Q: you talked about the need for cultural shifts..what does this mean?

Jay: first instruction...in the current system, often our neediest kids are getting a lot of their instruction from a para not a licensed special educator. The current funding formula is a disincentive...we want to have our highest quality teachers working with our neediest students as soon as you can...

IEPs need to be looked at, conversations with families need to be looked at - cultural shift from classroom teacher to families to principals to special educators.

Jeff Fanon VT NEA:

Vacancy rates in that dept are significant and not good for the long term success of Act 173 being rolled out to the field.

Licensing funded through fees teachers pay to the agency - successful part of the agency.