

# Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

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*Our schools are caring, creative, and equitable communities that empower all children to build on their talents and passions to grow into engaged citizens and life-long learners.*

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For the record, my name is Libby Bonesteel. I am the first and only superintendent the Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools have had. I took the position in 2018, the first year of the merger between the towns of Roxbury and Montpelier. That first year, as a naive new superintendent, I did not and could not have known the intense and emotional ramifications this merger would eventually lead to.

For background:

MRPS is right in the middle of the state. Working here at the State House, I'm sure you are all aware of the bustling town of Montpelier. You may be less aware of what Roxbury is like. Roxbury is a community made up of under 700 people. Some are newcomers who love the wide expanse their land offers while others have lived there for generations. The town is split by a very large hill creating a natural divide between the village and East Roxbury. There is a tiny post office, library, and general store along with a few other small businesses scattered on the main road. Roxbury Village School is the gem in the middle of the village. Many of the people who have lived in Roxbury for years took part in actually hammering in the nails during the expansion of the building in the 80's. The town is very proud of their little school building.

Our district educates approximately 1160 students - 1100-ish of which live in Montpelier; 60-ish from Roxbury. Up until last year, we operated 4 school buildings: 2 elementary schools - Union Elementary School (UES) at 400 students and Roxbury Village School (RVS) at 40 students, a middle, and high school. From fifth grade on, all students attended school in Montpelier. On average, 5-7 students from Roxbury entered MSMS as fifth graders. These students were split into four different home rooms. While all fifth graders are starting out in a new school, one could argue that this experience was quite different for a child from Roxbury than it was for a child from Montpelier.

From 2018-2023, we were able to run a preK classroom at RVS. Because of exceptionally low enrollment and our inability to fill the part-time position, we did not run a preK in the 2023-24 school year. We ran a straight K room and a multiage 1/2 and 3/4 classroom. Had the building been open this year, there would have been 3 kindergarten students with a full time teacher. Last year, the faculty to student ratio was approximately 1:5 and there was little way to increase the

ratio due to federal requirements for things like IDEA and state requirements in EQS.

My observation of RVS over the years was of kids and families who loved their school and viewed it as the center of the community. Beyond RVS families, Roxbury community members also feel that the school activity of the building was central to the health of the community. The kids spent Friday's in a neighbor's woods, ice skated at the senior center, and created their own beautiful mini-farm of yummy veggies that our food service would cook up. There was and still is an incredibly popular enrichment program run after school hours. Parents, kids, and staff described the school community as a family.

Like every school, there were also challenges. The average faculty turnover over six years was 25% compared to just 10% at Union Elementary School. I had three different principals in that same timespan - none of whom had previous administrative experience. While teachers collaborated well inside the building, they did not have colleagues to collaborate with who taught the same curriculum. Achieving high academic standards within multi-age classrooms, particularly in mathematics, is incredibly hard to accomplish. One needs to drive 25-30 minutes through three different school districts to get from Montpelier to Roxbury making things like sharing staff incredibly time-consuming. Because of busing, the two elementary schools ran on different start/end times making virtual collaboration nearly impossible. Our students at RVS struggled academically - initially scoring anywhere from 15-25 percentage points lower on math and literacy screeners than peers at UES and showed slower than normal growth over time.

Act 127 hit MRPS hard. Once the 5% cap was changed by the legislature, we were facing a significant tax increase - the likes of which our communities had never seen before. We were faced with having to cut significantly from our budget in order to get the tax hike down slightly. Our first budget failed rather impressively, something unheard of in Montpelier. When faced with drastically cutting programs in all of our schools, many in the Montpelier community began voicing what they perceived to be an easy fix - busing the elementary students from RVS to UES. UES had room, more services for students in need, and all of the classroom teachers from RVS would transfer to UES or MSMS because of regular yearly vacancies. Commentary, ranging from polite to downright disrespectful, was rife on Front Porch Forum in Montpelier and the school board received over 300 emails on the topic. While there were some Montpelier residents supporting keeping kids at RVS, the large majority of emails to the board advocated for closing RVS. Conversely, the Roxbury community strongly advocated for continuing to educate kids at RVS.

Our merger agreement is somewhat unique in that it gave the decision to close the school to the school board and did not require a town vote. From speaking to people on the merger committee and reading the meeting minutes, there were two schools of thought as the premise for this decision: 1) the committee knew that the town of Roxbury would never vote to close their school willingly; and 2) there needed to be a mechanism to determine the viability of the school in the

future.

This period between February to the second budget vote at the end of April tore my school board of 9 volunteers apart, particularly the two dedicated members from Roxbury. I spent nearly every moment of time during my work day either working on this challenge specifically or thinking about it. I certainly made mistakes and would do things differently if I had to endure this again. Emotions ran high...so much so that I had my first and, I hope, only restraining order established to ensure the safety of my staff and students at RVS. Public comment during board meetings was particularly hard. Roxbury proponents provided heartfelt and often angry comments directed at the school board and myself, while community members against keeping the building open made it clear they would not vote for the budget without closing RVS. Comments included:

- begging the board to keep the building open for one more year to give residents time for the transition;
- extolling all the wonderful things that happen with kids in the school building;
- reminiscing about childhoods spent at RVS years ago;
- disagreements regarding whether the school board had the right to make the decision;
- challenges to Roxbury ever wanting anything to do with Montpelier in the first place;
- assertions that Montpelier was “subsidizing” Roxbury;
- statements regarding the system being rigged against Roxbury and that the district “owed” Roxbury; and perhaps the most searing:
- repeatedly accusing the board and superintendent of “ripping the heart out of the community.”

In the end the school board voted to bus the students to UES. This reduced our budget by approximately \$1.5 million dollars and brought the tax burden down to a still high 13.84% increase in Montpelier and a 3.59% increase in Roxbury. Our second vote passed because of our Montpelier voters. It did not pass in Roxbury.

The board commissioned a transition committee to ensure we supported our students. The main topics of conversation centered around busing and maintaining a sense of community in Roxbury through after school enrichment. Union Elementary worked intentionally to welcome students from Roxbury through play groups and placements. From all I have been told, so far this year, bussing stinks, and most of the students, once they get off the bus, are thriving or, at the very least, happy. Early data shows that the additional support UES can offer is helping students from Roxbury grow at a faster clip in literacy and math.

I have been a superintendent through a global pandemic and led my district through historic flooding where we had 2 million gallons of water in our basement. I calmed terrified parents when police helicopters swirled above us while officers stormed our building with high caliber weapons during a fake swatting incident. I've seen and led through crises. Closing Roxbury and being told repeatedly by community members that I didn't care about the young people who I

have spent my career dedicated to was the one situation that kept me awake night after night. It quite literally changed who I am as a person and leader.

Patrick Reen, Superintendent of Mount Abraham, once said to me, “you will never win this argument because your reasoning is based on logic and the community’s is based on emotion. Emotion will win every time.” He is 100% correct. While our kids are doing well, it will take years to build the bridge between the Roxbury and Montpelier communities.

Small schools are something this legislature is going to have to contend with. I ask that you please take the burden off of superintendents and school boards to make these impossible decisions. The state must think about not only if/when/how to close the buildings, but also how to support small towns once the building is closed. The town of Roxbury will likely take on this burden and has pulled together a variety of great ideas. My hope is that they can create a thriving community center. It takes money and organizational know-how to do this - a burden we have now placed on their SelectBoard - essentially another group of five volunteers. If we, as a state, decide that we can no longer afford the system of small schools we have in place, it is the state who needs to step in and support our communities.

I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.