

December 11th, 2014

Dear Governor Shumlin and Secretary Holcombe,

This is the first time in my life I've written an anonymous letter. As a Vermont school principal, I find myself in a precarious position. I'm concerned that if I share my thoughts with you openly, my District could somehow come under political fire. I'm concerned for the privacy of my students. I also know that my concerns are echoed by many of my colleagues. I assure you, my input should be taken seriously and interpreted as being representative of the experience of many, many administrators in your schools.

I am writing in response to the Governor's repeated statements about school budgets and class sizes. I do understand that property taxes are a burden for Vermonters, because I am one. I understand the drag high property taxes put on the entire Vermont economy. I also understand that there are some governance and school size issues that could be addressed differently that might result in lower school costs. I am not arguing against the need to examine how we fund our schools, and to ask critical questions about what exactly we are funding.

I believe that while Secretary Holcombe touches on the issue of special education, neither one of you truly understands the crisis facing our schoolchildren. I would like to share a few situations with you that are all too real. These are stories of children who are the victims of the Great Recession and Vermont's plague of narcotics addiction. I have changed all the children's names.

Meet Tony. His mother gave birth to him when she was 19, right about the time she and Tony's father got into dealing Oxy. Tony was only 18 months when he was locked in a closet time after time to "keep him safe" while she ran out to help with drug deals. Addicted herself, she was not able to fully bond or attach with her toddler. After a stint in foster care, Tony has now been reunited with his mother, who is in a drug treatment program. The school is providing social work services, and Tony is supported in school with a full time behavioral interventionist. Still, there were three times during his fifth grade year when Tony "disassociated" during a mental health crisis. He threw a chair at his special educator; attacked the school principal, and destroyed the art room while the other students were evacuated for safety purposes. It's expensive to educate Tony in public school, but it's much more expensive to send him to a day treatment or residential center.

Then there is Jason. His parents were homeless for years due to losing their job and taking up Oxy, then heroin. The Department for Children and Families kept an eye on the kids, but left them with their "intact" family. By the time Jason was taken into custody and cared for by an aunt, he had not been to a physician in three years. He had never been to a dentist. Jason resisted the medical care, but did get vaccinated and the worst of his teeth were pulled. Jason also experienced trauma reactions. Although he is supported with a full time behavioral interventionist, the team has

not yet been able to predict what the exact triggers are for Jason. The police have been called twice since he bolted from the building and into the woods. The third time the police were called, Jason had barricaded himself in his classroom behind a wall of overturned desks. Again, his classmates had to be evacuated for their own safety.

Oh, and Sara. She told us, "Ed hit mommy again." Sara doesn't act out as violently as the boys I described to you. We are her seventh school. She is in third grade. "Ed" is the latest boyfriend, sharing the little family's room at the local shelter. Mommy was making it as a single parent, until she lost her job during the recession. Sara whispered to her teacher that Mommy was scared; they were getting thrown out of the center because Mommy and Ed kept fighting. Sara falls asleep by about 10:30 each morning. Although she is very far behind academically, the school team has agreed to let her take a 90-minute nap before lunch. The school is providing an instructional assistant to help Sara with remedial academics, and the classroom teacher differentiates instruction to align with Sara's current skill and interest levels. Still, it is going to take additional resources to bring Sara to grade level. She won't qualify for special education, because she has not had "access" to schooling, so all those costs will be born locally. Well, that will be another school's problem. We got the transfer paperwork today.

These are just a few stories. I could fill pages. I've been in Vermont education for over 30 years, and Vermont school administration for over 15. We've always had challenging students in our schools, but the volume has increased markedly in the past seven to ten years. You have been vocal about the problem facing our beautiful state in regard to the narcotics plague. You reported the statistics yourself: a 250 percent increase in addicts receiving treatment since 2000; a 135 percent increase from 2012 - 2013 in the number of people charged with heroin trafficking in federal court. Connect the dots, Governor. These people have children. The children are not well cared for. In fact, the vast majority of children suffered trauma. Perhaps they were not all locked in closets or living on the streets, but they may have suffered the experience of at least one parent going to jail. They might be living with their grandparents; they might be separated from siblings. These are all traumatic events that have a clear and documented effect on their ability to manage school. Yes, we are hiring extra staff to care for them, and quite frankly, to protect typically developing children from their trauma related behaviors. This is part of the "spending problem" you continue to talk about with the press.

I applaud your efforts to fund universal PreK. I applaud Secretary Holcombe for promoting PBIS and other "safe schools" initiatives. These are wonderful, absolutely to be celebrated. Quite honestly, though, they will not help Tony, Jason or Sara. These children, and hundreds more like them, have already suffered trauma. They need additional staff in order to be safe in our schools. They are expensive to educate, no doubt about it. But they have a right to an education. We've already done these kids wrong, Governor. It will cost money to make up for what has already happened to them.

It is very discouraging to “keep on keeping on” when our Governor not only ignores the problem, he doesn’t see it to begin with. When you continue to declare that we have ridiculously low adult:child ratios in our schools, keep Tony, Jason and Sara in mind. We have support staff trying to help these children. They provide security, consistency, attachment, guidance, counseling, academic support, and safe restraints when all else fails. We feed the children, provide medical care, and yes, give them naps when that is what they need. Our support staff make between \$12-\$20 an hour, and do not get health insurance. That, dear Governor, is a bargain. If you have a better plan for educating these young Vermonters, we’d all like to hear it. When you declare that school budgets are too high, the public hears “Teachers make too much money.” Budgets go down. Technology gets cut. Enrichment gets cut. We can’t cut these extra staff, Governor. The bell rings, and Tony, Jason, Sara and at least five others like them walk in my door every morning. I need those extra adults to keep everyone safe.

We have so many pressures today. We are re-tooling our curriculum to align with the Common Core; preparing to administer a new, online standardized test; and developing plans for preschool and “Personalized Learning.” These are the kinds of pressures Vermont educators have experienced again and again over time. We take them in stride, and continue to provide a world-class education. We are efficient and effective in what we do. We are not asking to have these pressures removed; we understand they are part of what it takes to keep schooling current. What we need is for you to understand the unique circumstances we are facing with the children of the Great Recession and the narcotics plague. These children are NOT okay, and they are not likely to become less expensive over time. I’d like to hear you acknowledge this. I’d like to know that my Governor understands the impact these societal circumstances have had on our schools.

Imagine that you are a gardener. You tend your garden and raise produce. During a particularly difficult stretch, there was a terrible drought, and a plague of invasive insects and weeds. At the same time, you are expected to use new gardening tools and approaches, and to generate not only the same level of production, but to do it at a lower cost. The drought was not in your control. The pests were not your fault, and there is not much you can do to stop them. Your “boss” has been very public about the increased costs for your garden, encouraging others to vote down any increases to help you deal with the drought or the pests. I’m sure you would not feel encouraged, nor would you be likely to vote for this boss.

That’s where we stand, Governor. I stood in the voting booth and considered long and hard before I cast my vote. I don’t feel heard. I don’t feel understood. I think before you do too many more press conferences, you ought to interview some school principals. Tell them about this letter. Ask them if they have students like Tony, Jason or Sara. Visit some schools. Learn how we are managing with the children of the recession and the narcotics plague. Then sit down with Mr. James

and decide – do we have a spending problem in Vermont’s schools, or are the costs a symptom of a larger disease?

I appreciate you taking the time to read this letter and think about what I have said.

Sincerely,

A Vermont principal

Cc: Vermont Principal’s Association
Press contacts
Senator Patrick Leahy