

**Reflections:  
Farewell to colleagues on the State Board of Education**

**John Carroll  
16 June 2021**

In this, my final "Chair's Report", I wish to share with you some reflections on our service together on the State Board of Education and to offer some thoughts for the future.

First, I wish to acknowledge and thank each of you for serving this "brave little state" by your work here on the State Board of Education. In accepting the Governor's appointment to the State Board, you are part of a long and honorable tradition. You are part of a 230-year heritage of Vermonters dedicated to "*res publica*", that is, the making of government "*of, for, and by the people*".

Vermont has had a State Board of Education, in one form or another, for nearly 120 years. But it would be a mistake to assume that the existence of the State Board is immutable or even assured. The State Board has been abolished at least three times over the last century. And it's worth remembering that the Board exists *only* at the will of the General Assembly.

As you know, a lot of the Board's work is to make reality of legislative initiatives. For example, in the last four years nearly all the Board's time and talent have been devoted to work required of us by the General Assembly -- implementing Act 46 (school district consolidation), and, for the last 18 months, drafting Rules for Act 173 (reform of special education funding and practice).

As important and as interesting as this work has been, it's left precious-little time for the Board to pursue other issues and interests. Looking ahead, I see a less-crowded legislative horizon - meaning that *your* Board will have more bandwidth to pursue *your Board's concerns*.

As you do so, your attention to the founding architecture of the State Board will be more important than ever. By design, the Board is unique. You are not elected. You do not represent any stake-holders or special interests. Some of you are educators by background or experience, but most of you are not. By design, members of this Board are appointed *not* as educational experts or advocates, but as thoughtful Vermonters with an interest in education.

All of which is to say that your *opinions* about " what' s wrong with education ", or " what we need to fix" are irrelevant. If you have an " agenda " about education, the State Board's not the right place for you.

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Your duty on this Board is to bring your values, your life-experience, and your personal integrity - and then apply them to *the facts on the ground* - the actual realities, not the 'virtues-signaling' and persuasions of advocates. In your work for the Board, don't hesitate to...

... challenge the conventional wisdoms - especially the *conceit* that we in Vermont do education better than all the other states. Maybe that was true a decade ago, but it's certainly *not* true today. Learn from how other states do it better.

... be wary of 'either/or' policy-making. For example, educators today talk single-mindedly about race and ethnic inclusivity in Vermont schools - even while ten-times as many Vermont students are marginalized by economic, geographic, or cultural disadvantage. Move from "either/or" to "yes/and".

... question the *fads* in education - e. g. 'portfolio-based assessment', 'learning styles', and, most ironic of all, 'critical thinking'. Rely on research-based evidence and actual experience, here and in other states.

Recognize always that education in Vermont is unlike any other public function in the state. Education is neither *state-run* - like the Division of Families and Children, or the Department of Fish and Wildlife -- nor is it *locally-run* - like the city recreation department, or the town conservation commission.

Uniquely among all the vital public services in our state, education is "*both/and*" - local *and* state-wide. Education *happens* in the communities, where two-hundred-thousand Vermonters - school board members, administrators, teachers, aides, support staff, students, and parents - are closely engaged with education, one-on-one, every day. That's nearly one in every three Vermonters!

In stark contrast, at the state-wide level, merely a thousand folks in Montpelier - legislators, agency administrators, advocates, lobbyists, academics - shape education policy. What's decided by legislators and administrators in Montpelier has a huge impact on the education that is delivered in communities all across the state.

Naturally, these two groups - the folks in Montpelier with state-wide perspective and the folks in the communities who actually deliver and encounter education - see things very differently. This is normal and healthy in a pluralistic democracy. But their different perspectives make for very difficult, sometimes intractable, conversations. (If you doubt *that*, just look back two years to Act 46- and the painful arguments about dissolution going on even today.)

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Unlike *either* of these groups, the State Board's role is to be available and responsive to *both* Montpelier *and* to the communities. The State Board's job is to listen to and understand the goals and objectives of policy-influencers and policy-makers in Montpelier... *and...to* listen to and understand concerns and challenges faced by the school boards, educators, students, and parents in the communities. Our unique role is to convey and to interpret Montpelier's perspectives to the communities, and the communities' perspectives to Montpelier -- and to work as intermediary toward a common ground.

So, if you share my conviction that the State Board plays a unique and vital role in balancing the interests of the State and the communities, then (to paraphrase Dwight Eisenhower's farewell) be mindful of the "*bureaucracy/advocacy complex*". Some of these folks would *strip* this Board of its influence and authority -- so as to marginalize local school boards, administrators, and educators and to consolidate *more* power in state government.

These days, the State Board's reputation is strong with the Legislature - which is good, because it's the Legislature who determines if the State Board lives or dies. So, while you broaden your agenda and perspectives to convene important new policy discussions of importance to your State Board, don't forget to "protect your flanks": continue to nourish this Board's strong relationship with the General Assembly.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge and thank two Agency staffers -- Suzanne Sprague and Maureen Gaidys -- who have so faithfully supported the State Board these many years - and have been so helpful to my work as your Chair. Maureen and Suzanne are exemplars of the kindness, dignity, and hard work that is the *best* of Vermont. It's been a *privilege* to work with you.

And to you, my Board colleagues, I thank you, each and all. It has been an *honor* to work with you and to serve as your Chair.

kind regards,



John Carroll

Norwich, Vermont  
16 June 2021