

Civil Discourse in Education

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As leaders in education, it is our obligation to model civil discourse and problem-solving. When faced with conflict or opposing priorities, do we want future generations to approach a situation with humility and a commitment to understanding, or do we want them to draw a line in the sand and vilify those who stand on the other side? Our children are watching today. At every opportunity, we must teach and model conflict resolution and consensus building if we believe those skills are necessary for the health and wellbeing of tomorrow's society.

Recently, I have seen two issues challenge the education community's ability to engage in civil discourse. The first involves changes to employee health care plans; the second involves revisions to the rules governing independent schools. Both make changes to long-standing systems that provide significant benefit to many Vermonters. In each case, the VSBA has been supportive of the changes and has been publicly attacked for doing so.

The ability to access high quality, affordable health coverage is a priority most Vermonters share. In the spring of 2015, the Vermont Education Health Initiative (VEHI) decided to replace existing school employee health insurance with plans designed to be competitive with Vermont Health Connect. This change means that, as of January 1, 2018, all school employees will be on new health care plans. Employees are understandably concerned about the impact these changes will have on themselves and their families.

The new health plans cover the same health services and networks, but they have higher out-of-pocket costs (deductibles and co-pays). Because the premiums for these plans are markedly lower, there are opportunities to keep employees' out-of-pocket costs at current levels while also creating savings for taxpayers. The VSBA spent the last year providing information and advice to help school boards negotiate changes to the new health plans. Since one role of a school board is to determine how best to deploy resources in service of children and in support of the professionals that work with them, our guidance has been focused on helping boards reach settlements that benefit taxpayers and are fair to employees.

This Fall, I reached out to Vermont-NEA leadership to discuss an approach to negotiating agreements that would benefit both employees and taxpayers. While we had a constructive conversation, the organization has since accused the VSBA of pushing an aggressive agenda designed to hurt teachers and their families.

The Vermont-NEA's monthly newsletter, distributed to over 12,000 Vermonters, includes content that attacks the VSBA for providing information and guidance designed to help school districts realize savings through the health care transition. In September, the Vermont-NEA reported to their members that the VSBA's recommendations were part of an "aggressive, cost-shifting strategy, which will...hurt teachers, support staff and their families." Their December 2016 issue includes the headline "VSBA Agenda Clearly Has Your Healthcare in Crosshairs," and

accuses the VSBA of “manufacturing a crisis” where all districts are bargaining at the same time, and of engineering a change to the VEHI board structure in order to advance a bargaining agenda.

The transition to new health plans will not be successful if employees and communities are pitted against each other. All parties should bargain with an open mind, prepared to understand the options available and the objectives of both sides. Regrettably, we are already seeing signs of labor/management strife early in the bargaining cycle.

Similarly, the State Board of Education’s rules governing independent schools have generated a lot of controversy and anger in certain areas of the state. In this instance, the State Board of Education is attempting to address concerns about public dollars going to private institutions that do not serve students with disabilities. The process has been far from perfect. But, when attending two public meetings in communities strongly opposed to the rules changes, I was taken aback by the hostility shown to speakers with opposing points of view. People who spoke in favor of the rules were booed or told to take their seat. The State Board of Education was accused of trying to destroy communities and employing “greasy back door” tactics; the VSBA was declared to be on a mission to destroy school choice and independent schools in Vermont. Neither assertion is true.

Representatives from the independent schools, the State Board of Education, and public school representatives have been meeting to determine areas of common ground and opportunities to improve the rules. Outside of those focused meetings, however, the heated rhetoric continues.

Our society needs civil discourse now more than ever. The issues facing our communities, state, nation and the world demand dialogue focused on identifying common ground and workable solutions. Our challenges are complex, and require a willingness to understand diverse perspectives and create new approaches to solving old problems. In 2017, I hope all education stakeholders will engage in civil discourse as we chart a course for the future of our schools and communities. Vermont’s children deserve no less.

