

The Newton School

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Greg Bagnato

Principal

Dear Parents and Guardians,

November 23, 2017

As the snow begins to fly and the temperature gets a little colder, I am reminded of change and the need to plan for what is to come. (Yes, my wood is all stacked...almost). Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays because I am with my family and while we are not fully in the depths of winter and all the wonderful activities it provides, I am forced to slow down and reflect.

The Newton School is a busy place. At the supervisory level there have been many changes. The towns of South Royalton and Bethel have voted to merge their school districts. Middle school students will attend school in Bethel and high school students will go to South Royalton. Chelsea voters have decided to close their high school and merge with Tunbridge. Creating a shared middle school between the two towns may occur for the 2019-20 school year. Sharon and Strafford are continuing their current structure and governance. However, everyone feels the challenge that is inherent with these huge transitions.

At the last school board meeting there was a forum on culture and climate at the school. I appreciated the parents, teachers, and community members who participated. There are also others who communicated their appreciation and concerns about the school directly to me. The purpose of this letter is to share information so everyone knows the current facts and issues.

- Parents and students have shared their appreciation for small class size, adults at school knowing the students, the ability for the school to meet individual students needs, and the dedication of the teachers.
- Based on state-wide testing, the Newton School ranks 4th in Vermont among all elementary and middle schools.
- The themes for improving the school include the challenge of small social circles for students, a curriculum that is not engaging enough, and too few academic choices.
- Another large concern was the perceived notion that students are leaving Newton in large numbers. The reasons for families removing their children are; moving to another town, private family matters, and dissatisfaction with the school. While I am unable to give reasons for particular families choices, below is a table showing the number of students who have "moved" into or "moved" out of the Newton School over the past 5 years.

School Year	Students "Moving" into Newton School	Students "Moving" out of Newton School
2013-14	12	11
2014-15	13	6
2015-16	13	9
2016-17	9	8
2017-18	5	12
Total	52	46

*From 2013/14 to 2017/18, out of the 52 students that "moved" in, an estimated 17% transferred or tuitioned into Newton.

*From 2013/14 to 2017/18, out of the 46 students that "moved" out, an estimated 17% left the Newton School for reasons other than physically moving out of the Strafford School District (family matters, dissatisfaction, etc.).

First, it is important to revisit the structures in place to address communication and concerns. As stated in the handbook (p 11), parents and guardians are encouraged to get answers to any questions or concerns by contacting the adult who works directly with your child (usually the classroom teacher). If you are unsatisfied or you feel the teacher cannot help, please feel free to contact me. We all want open and honest communication as our busy lives have little time for anything else. I am always available to schedule a meeting and present at all PTA and school board meetings. I will give a more thorough presentation on enrollment data described to the Strafford School Board on Tuesday, December 12th at Sharon Elementary.

Second, it is important to look at what we have done to improve our small school. Data and feedback from students, parents, staff, alumni, and community members is essential for creating school goals. Last spring, all students in grades 3-8 took an anonymous survey regarding their experiences at school. The questions came from the *Successful Practices Network* (<http://www.wesurveys.org/spn/page/Survey-Overview>) that surveyed students, teachers, and parents in 2013-14. Student responses were anonymous, and showed great improvements in many areas, especially academic rigor. However, we also saw a need to improve student/teacher relationships. This data (<https://tinyurl.com/ybwmjqxp>) helped us set a goal to have all teaching staff trained in Responsive Classroom (a program on building relationships and a cooperative learning environment). Also, data from feedback after parent conferences last year was a catalyst for setting a second school-wide goal; having students lead their conferences. Data from a few years ago facilitated a more systematic outdoor program, middle school play, and elective choices for 7th and 8th graders. I believe we are a responsive school that takes the needs of our community seriously. Of course we can, and will, do more. I would love to hear more feedback (accolades and concerns) from parents, as we cannot help without it. Also, there will be an Action Plan Committee created that needs parent and community members to help direct the school's path for the next three years. Please contact me if you are interested.

One of my favorite books of all time is now a movie. *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, is a story about a young boy who, because of physical differences struggles more than others his age with the unavoidable experience of growing up. The main character's teacher gives him a precept (or quote to reflect upon) once a month. In the book, April's precept was; "*It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.*" — *James Thurber*.

During this particular Thanksgiving reflection, I hope the school, parents, and students keep working to identify the right questions to ask so that we can collaborate and find the answers together. A stronger school will not only create successful individual students, but will continue to be the central part of our wonderful community.

Happy Thanksgiving,



Greg Bagnato