

Speech to Emerging Leaders Conference – 2009

Good evening. I am Jason Di Giulio, representative from the VT-NEA Board of Directors. On behalf of the Board of Directors and your new President, Martha Allen, I welcome you to the Emerging Leaders Workshop. VT-NEA values the Emerging Leaders classes, as it is here, with these colleagues and professionals, that the spirit of the organization is truly reinforced, and vision is given energy.

Tim Krause, President of the Cincinnati teacher's association, said that, *A union establish[es] a democratic workplace in an institution that tends to be autocratic. The bargaining table is where that discussion takes place.*" The same is true in Vermont – especially in light of the current economic difficulties. VT-NEA and her teachers are experiencing veritable tide of unpleasant negotiations, grievances, administrator actions and public pressure to forego raises.

Education in Vermont is feeling the effects of the down-turn. Our population is getting older and our student numbers are shrinking. As the state population grows older, so do most teachers. We have a system that employs mostly 'more experienced' educators. The salary schedules have traditionally favored those older employees. Schools are feeling the crunch of wages and declining populations. Vermont Commissioner of Finance James Reardon, in a recent Times Argus article, is quoted as stating that "I don't know how we can continue to do business as usual," Reardon said. "It is time we understand it is time we make some changes in how we do business."

Vermont Educators have had great success in the past – our students generally rank at #4 in scores and our NECAP results, in general, show that teachers are working hard. Our students attain competency and meet standards most of the time. Many say it's our small class sizes, on average, as compared to the rest of the nation. Others note the small schools that dot our beautiful, yet frequently geographically isolated, communities. Some, however, attribute these factors and the dedication of our faculty to the growth and success of our students. I know, with confidence, that it is engaged professionals like you – willing to serve, to direct, to inspire, and to reflect on your own experiences that make the real difference.

The success of students, the belief that every Vermont child deserves not only an appropriate education, but a great one, is the goal of VT-NEA. Governor Douglas, Commissioner Reardon, and other advocates of larger class sizes, state-wide teacher contracts, and the closure of small schools must think they are proposing positive changes to our system. They must, I have to trust, believe that gutting our retirement and destroying the promise they made when we joined the profession is a good idea.

Our elected leaders in Montpelier must, again, I hope, think that Vermont students will do more with less teachers and bigger schools. Douglas and Reardon must believe that a long bus ride and underfunded professionals will make the crucial difference in student achievement...It seems a rational paradox – you've done well...go home, work somewhere else, move on. It is a movement not motivated by good for the students, but for money. I call *shenanigans*. I call shame. We are expected to plan, teach, assess, re-teach, inspire, mentor, guide, comfort, assist, coach, communicate, and model. All this, we do, not because of the pay, but because we love. It's a lot to ask of anyone. In these troubling times, there is more work to do.

VT-NEA has two structures that operate concurrently. We have a full-time cadre of professionals, like Emma, who keep the front lines open. There is a large group of governance persons, like me, who fill elected positions. The Board of Directors for VT NEA has one representative from each region of the state that help guide and advise the organization. There are Board spots available, often, and elections are ongoing. The Board looks to support local leaders, give advice and policy to the full-time cadre, and fulfill other duties as required by our constitution and bylaws.

Local leadership is of crucial importance. Many of our local presidents and grievance folks have been there since Moses was in short pants – or at least since their locals were organized. The president I was elected to replace had held the office for most of our 22 organized years. It's hard to find candidates for association offices at the local level. Local presidents and officers make the most impact on the day-to-day working conditions of their schools, yet they are positions that are difficult to fill.

Another chance to shine is our State and National Representative Assembly. There, by our governance, the budget, policies, and actions of our associations are determined by US. Each local and state is allowed to send a certain number of delegates to the respective RA. Locals often look for people. The state struggles to find enough candidates to fill the ticket, some years. I was a write-in candidate, with 11 votes, and I was eligible to go. Virtually everyone who wants to may participate. I encourage you to seek responsibilities, seek leadership roles, or find someone to take the journey with you. It's essential that we, collectively, re-organize VT-NEA.

Our organization is going to have some difficulties in the future. We are in a precarious economic circumstance, our population is aging, and we're having difficulty holding-on to teachers. Many of us will have another few careers before we retire – how can an organization such as VT NEA remain relevant...when many of us won't be here, or might be in a different career, in a few years? We have to help VT NEA change its orientation. We've gotten into the habit of 'serving' our teachers. "You take care of the kids, we'll take care of you" is a common sentiment. We need to start engaging our potential members (No more NONMEMBERS) and ending the meetings-to-have-

meetings . We need to embrace issues, team about them, be creative, and be SEMPER GUMBY.

I am honored to have been invited today. I hope that you continue to have the courage to teach. In a world where our classrooms can be isolated fiefdoms of solitary service, I applaud you coming here, to team. I and your Board of Directors, on behalf of your President and our 11, 500 members, encourage and support you.