

Governor Scott: Where are the Children in Your School Budget Schemes?

By Don Tinney

Recently, I came across an extraordinary video produced by Gov. Phil Scott's Agency of Education. It was a beautiful, well-produced exploration of what makes the tiny Cabot School – the type of school the governor and his adherents would shutter if they had their austerity way – the bedrock of this small and vital Vermont community.

The video features faculty, parents, and, most importantly, the community's children. Teachers talk about connections made between abstract ideas and fundamental skills. Parents talk about how the school is important to Cabot's sense of community. And students talk about being challenged and encouraged by their teachers to direct their own learning. One of those educators puts it exactly right: "It's a job, but for people who are here it's more than a job. It just is. You're committed emotionally to it, so we do a lot with very little, more than people realize."

I've been an educator in Vermont since 1986 and agree that it is much more than a job; it demands an emotional commitment and requires constant investment of energy and creativity. And it's all worth it. For me, there is nothing more rewarding than seeing former students as successful and happy adults creating their own families and communities, living lives that bring them contentment and joy.

What does not bring me – or my fellow 13,000 members – contentment and joy is the governor's tired, broken-record of bashing our state's public schools. He memorably voted against his town's school budget this year and led the charge to try and convince other Vermonters to do as he did and turn their backs on students and their communities.

In an unprecedented move this fall, the governor decided to become the backseat driver in every local school board budget discussion, sending the message that school boards and administrators spend too much money on too many schools.

He waxes austere, singing the same old song he has been singing for eight years: cut budgets, close schools, and get rid of educators. What he does not do is celebrate or even contemplate what his own education agency extolled in the Cabot School video I watched last week.

In fact, missing in his screeds is any mention of what public-school educators do every single day: put Vermont's children first.

I readily admit that this year's school budget season was challenging. More than a third of voters initially rejected their local school budgets on Town Meeting Day. We cannot fault Vermonters facing double-digit increases in their property tax bills for asking tough questions. Such an increase is unfair and unsustainable in a rural state struggling to meet the needs of all its residents.

But instead of bashing a system that is still regarded as one of the best in the nation, the governor could – and should – join us in calling for an overhaul of how we raise money for public schools. Our union has for more than five years called for the elimination of the residential education property tax. Taxing working Vermonters on the value of their homes is regressive and leaves millions of

dollars in the pockets of the wealthiest Vermonters. Using an income tax to support our schools would raise more money from Vermont's wealthiest residents, who now pay a smaller part of their incomes than middle- and working-class folks do.

He could also join us in putting our state's kids first.

Schools, educators, and students are not entries on a spreadsheet. They are foundational parts of our state and are woven tightly into the fabric of communities from Newport to Newfane, Burlington to Berlin, St. Johnsbury to Brattleboro and everywhere in between.

And in Cabot. As a student says in the conclusion of the video, "Having that sense of community is really important. I think that's the foundation for all the bigger things we do here." Building strong public schools and communities is the foundation for all the bigger things Vermonters will do.

Governor Scott, you'd learn a lot by watching that video produced by your very own Agency of Education. Maybe, just maybe, you'll share our commitment to the mission of putting students first.

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