Dear Academy Families,

September 17, 2014

This letter contains information about the new Common Core Standards and associated high-stakes testing. It requires patience to read and understand. It discusses important issues such as student privacy, school funding, local control of education, and teacher and principal evaluation. What I have written is based on facts, but represents my interpretation of these facts given my experience as an educator. I also realize that my interpretations are open to debate. In the Academy Café on October 16th from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m., we are holding a public forum—From the Statehouse to the Classroom: Understanding the Common Core and High-Stakes Testing. This will be a semi-structured discussion of this letter as well as a discussion of other information and opinions.

In late August you received a letter from Vermont’s Secretary of Education, Rebecca Holcombe. Secretary Holcombe explained that a large majority of schools in Vermont have been designated in need of improvement because all students nationwide were required to receive “proficient” NECAP scores in math, reading, and writing by 2014; a requirement of the federal No Child Let Behind Act of 2001. (Note: Schools that agreed to pilot the new national standardized test, the SBAC, were not labeled improvement schools as were a small number of schools who have previously met AYP. A school must fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years to be designated in need of improvement.) Prior to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal government funded educational programs if schools complied with particular requirements. NCLB used a different approach. Instead of offering funding for a proposed program, it threatened to remove funds if states and schools did not comply. This trend of sanctions is not only continuing; it is worsening.

As 2014 approached, the federal policy requiring 100% proficiency changed (with strings attached). States could sign a “waiver agreement.” Signing the waiver allowed all schools within the states to escape the “in need of improvement” sanctions (and the associated sanctions), in exchange for accepting to agree to other mandated federal requirements.

Vermont did not sign the waiver because of the nature of federal mandates attached to the waiver. Vermont did agree to adopt the Common Core Standards and administer the new standardized test developed by the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Schools that refused these requirements lost flexibility in how they could use their federal Title I dollars and develop improvement plans. In early September, Oklahoma joined Indiana in repealing its initial acceptance of the new standards and testing. This is an example of funding sanctions imposed on schools for not complying with federal policies. What makes matters worse is that the Title I program funds that are being sanctioned are specifically designed to provide extra support to economically disadvantaged students. States could argue that requiring acceptance of the Common Core violates the 10th Amendment: powers that are not granted to the federal government are reserved to the states. But we haven’t arrived at this point yet.

The media hype about the Common Core and testing is very confusing and important details are not reported in the media. For example, the policies and initiatives surrounding the standards also include shifts in student privacy issues reflected in Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and in teacher and principal evaluations. Also, there are important questions that don’t have clear answers. For example, it is unclear what the new criteria will be for becoming a school “in need of improvement” or, for nearly all Vermont schools, removing the “in need of improvement” designation.

There is nothing inherently bad about the Common Core Standards. The creators of the Common Core claim that these new standards will better prepare students for college and work (http://www.corestandards.org/). I would argue that there are not dramatic differences between these standards and old standards or between these standards and what good teachers and schools have always done. It is true, not all school districts have figured out how to effectively educate students, but it is also true that we have seen that 13 years of standards, testing, and sanctions have not provided a great deal of help, especially in extremely dysfunctional school systems.

Fairlee, Vershire, West Fairlee, VT and Orford, NH
It is important to recognize that the U.S. is in its third round of standards. In the early 90’s the National Councils of Teachers of English, Math, and Social Studies created content standards. These were followed by state standards, measured by the old NECAP test. Now we have the Common Core and SBAC. The in need of improvement designation itself isn’t very meaningful if there isn’t a proven plan to help schools improve. Many schools in Vermont had received this designation because they had not met their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets. Most schools never subsequently improved, partly because the AYP target kept moving toward the 2014 standard of 100% proficiency for all students. The list of improvement schools kept growing until this year when all schools in Vermont made the list (except those that gave the test).

Here is Rivendell’s story: RA is a school that did remove itself from being in need of improvement in math. (We also made great improvements in science.) From 2010-2012 our math scores did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals, and we fell into the “in need of improvement” category. Between 2010 and 2012 we were already doing things to improve math instruction. In 2013 and 2014 our scores improved dramatically. Nonetheless, we were designated in need of improvement. The requirement of submitting plans to the state after we had already improved our scores wasn’t useful.

To make matters worse, last fall I was told by our state “improvement coach” that we were out of compliance with our plan because we completed our improvement plan early! We were required to work on the plan for three years. Our coach made the necessary modifications, but rather than doing meaningful work, we were playing bureaucratic games. Certainly, meaningful change takes time and is incredibly complex, but, 1) we did not focus on NECAP tests or Vermont Standards when we made the changes that (have possibly) caused the improved test scores and 2) the state-sanctioned improvement process was not a factor in our decision-making. These facts lead me to believe that in order to be more useful the state requirements for improvement need to improve. How the requirements should change is an interesting question in itself.

Federal and state policies are moving to connect the Common Core and SBAC to teacher and principal evaluations. States that signed the waiver agreement are required to use SBAC test results as part of the evaluation process. It is unclear what Vermont will do. The federal logic does seem clear. No Child Left Behind didn’t greatly improve schools. Punishing schools didn’t work; thus, we need to hold teachers and principals accountable. Sounds logical, but…. Using the Common Core and SBAC scores for teacher evaluation has been called into question. Research has recently shown that the correlation between teachers’ instructional alignment to the Common Core standards and student achievement was weak. Even worse, there was no association between student achievement and instruction when students’ tests results were combined with other measures of teacher effectiveness. The Gates Foundation commissioned this research (Instructional Alignment as a Measure of Teaching Quality), and Gates has been one of the major forces in creating the Common Core. And the logic continues to unravel; the research also used measures of teacher effectiveness based on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s “Measures of Effective Teaching” study. Evidently, the cart was put before the horse. After the instructional alignment research was released, the Gates Foundation published a public letter indicating that teachers need more time to adjust to the Common Core before the test results are tied to teacher evaluation (http://www.scribd.com/doc/229025040/A-Letter-to-Our-Partners-Let-27s-Give-Students-and-Teachers-Time-2). It might also be that the idea of evaluating teachers on standardized test scores is flawed.

Privacy is another area of concern. Identifiable data about individual students will now be collected as part of the SBAC testing. The National Education Data Model (http://nces.ed.gov/forum/datamodel/) contains over 400 data points that are likely to be used to gather information on individuals (http://nces.ed.gov/forum/datamodel/eiebrowser/techview.aspx?instance=studentElementarySecondary). Rebecca Holcombe has signed a letter to Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, indicating that Vermont will not share personally identifiable information with any federal agencies. But the letter is not a guarantee that this decision will always be the case. Vermont

received nearly 5 million dollars to create the Vermont Automated Data System so it can share some information to meet federal requirements. On page 9, The Vermont proposal for that federal grant to build that data system states: “Using CEDS as the basis for this repository also positions Vermont well should they wish to initiate interstate data sharing in the future.”

(http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-SLDS_VADR_Abstract_and_Project_Proposal.pdf) Interstate data sharing could include information tied directly to individual Vermont students. There is a difference between a letter and legislation that will not allow such data to be shared.

Other Federal agencies are constructing similar databases. For example, the US Labor Department has a Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI). Their materials state: “The long-term WDQI and SLDS goals for States is to use their longitudinal data systems to follow individuals through school and into and though their work life.” Additionally, the document states, “WDQI supports the development of, or enhancement to, longitudinal administrative databases that will integrate workforce data and create linkages to educational data”

(http://www.doleta.gov/performance/wrokforcedatagrant09.cfm). Vermont is not listed as one of the grantees for creating this database.

The current policies were built on a set of mechanistic assumptions. First, if we have one set of national standards and one common test given to all students, we will have information that policymakers can use to improve education. Second, a standardized test is a reliable and valid means to track students’ intellectual growth. Third, if individual students can be linked to individual teachers, it will be possible to evaluate teachers based partially on how much each student improves on the test from one year to another. At the school level, state officials can use the information to evaluate principals. Fourth, if a large amount of individual student information can be gathered and shared across state lines and different government agencies, policy-makers can make better decisions. And finally, there is the assumption that policy-makers and legislators—people distant from the daily work in schools—can make helpful decisions about education and educational spending based on four or five hours of standardized testing. Can the information be helpful to educators? I believe so, but only if other very complex factors are addressed.

Where do we stand as a unified District? Do we believe the Common Core Standards and SBAC will ultimately benefit our students and their learning? If so, are there changes that need to be made going forward or do we fully support it as it currently stands? If not, do we join Oklahoma and Indiana and have we fully researched all potential ramifications of such a decision that might negatively impact our students and their learning? And, what can we put into place to avoid such negative consequences? Please join us for a discussion to determine where our District stands; and to identify if there are any next steps and/or action that we should be taking.

Sincerely,

Keri Gelenian
Head of Schools/RA Principal