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All things being equitable

Backlash over Thornton's stance on RNeSU Equity Policy

By LEE J. KAHR

BRANDON — The fallout for a proposed equity policy for Otter Valley Unified Union School District (OVUU) has lingered over the past three weeks, but talks will continue, according to Board Chair Laurie Bertrand.

Bertrand said Monday that board members are trying to work through an issue that arose at the school district's April 7 board meeting.

"I think that the board is wrapping its head around this," she said. "April 7 was the first time they had a chance to read it and discuss (the proposed policy)."

It was at that meeting when board member Kevin Thornton, a white parent, college professor and historian, took issue with

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OVUU/RNeSU Board Chair
Laurie Bertrand

the proposed equity policy for the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union. Thornton said he disagrees with the goals of the equity policy and how it would be implemented.

At that meeting, Thornton contended there were class differences and biases in the school district that outweighed race issues because there are so few students of color, and that should be the focus of the policy. He also criticized the credentials of the consultant brought in to do an equity training class with the board.

School officials hope having such a policy will create a school climate more sensitive to bias and prejudice against mar-

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 ginalized groups. If the policy is adopted, there will be expected behavior standards among students and staff alike, and current curriculum will be examined to weed out insensitive policy and education practices when it comes to the most marginalized populations in local schools.

The goal is to institute sociocultural change within the school district, to teach kids and staff alike not just tolerance but acceptance, and to combat systemic racism and prejudice.

Supporters point out that the proposed school policy can address bias across many sociopolitical lines and prejudice based on gender, sexual orientation and disability, as well those who are low income, on food assistance, foster children, and different learners.

Thornton's critics say that by dismissing racism as a non-issue because students are predominantly white, Thornton is dismissing all of the hidden racial biases inherent to any individual.

Bertrand said she is encouraging board members to voice their opinions and disagreements on this matter during open meetings on the record, rather than speaking to her privately.

"He has the right to his opinion," Bertrand said of Thornton. "A few board members have publicly disagreed, but they need to speak out because that's the only way I know how they feel on the record," she said.

"And we need to do it respectfully. I'm trying as chair to find a way to make sure everyone is heard without the screaming and name calling."

Bertrand is also chair of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Board, which met last Wednesday and submitted an addendum to the OVUU Board on the proposed equity policy. The OVUU Board will take it up at its next meeting on May 5 at 6 p.m. All meetings are online.

The addendum recommends adding religion, color, ancestry, national origin, and place of birth to the list of areas and groups in the school district affected by discrimination and prejudice.

THE NAACP

The OVUU discussion caught the attention of Mia Schultz, the Executive Director of the Rutland NAACP. She was the only person of color at the meeting and said she was deeply concerned by what she heard.

"What is problematic is that (Thornton) doesn't have any experience as a Black person in this country," she said. "He has no idea what that feels like, so for him to be so adamant... and isn't that how white supremacy shows up? So he's just the model of white supremacy and how it shows up and that was front and center at that meeting."

Schultz said she left the online meeting as the discussion wound down and Thornton tried to engage her.

"He actually lectured me, the only person of color in the room, who receives stacks of complaints from people about racism," she said. "We don't need a white guy telling me what it feels like to be a Black person in Vermont. That's when I left."

Brandon resident Michael Shank was present at the April 7 meeting and interjected at one point that the Equity Policy "is the floor," and where the district will begin to build equity.

"I agreed with (Michael Shank)," Schultz said. "If this is the floor, and we can't even get past the floor... it's very troubling to me."

What would be more troubling to Schultz is not having a school district equity policy at all.

"Why would a Black family want to move to Brandon in that case?" she asked. "Because if you don't say you're for equity, why would anyone come here? We do a disservice to people by not intentionally making this a welcoming place."

It should be noted that the Brandon Select Board adopted a town equity policy in March that rejects racism and bias against marginalized groups and promotes diversity.

The OVUU Board will meet again on May 5 at 6 p.m. Visit www.rnesu.org and click on May 5 meeting under Meeting and Events. The login and call in information to participate in the meeting is listed under "More details."

Lego: Use the Force
(with mini-figure)



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