

Local superintendent honored

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BRANDON — A Rutland County superintendent was among those recently recognized by Vermont's school nurses for her work helping to mitigate the coronavirus pandemic.

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, is the recipient of the 2020 James Stackpole Award, presented by the Vermont State School Nurses Association.

Soph Hall, president of VSSNA and a nurse at Miller's Run School in Sheffield, said Collins has been a "champion" for school nurses throughout the pandemic.

She described Collins as someone who listened to school nurses, deferred to their expertise and ensured they were front and center in the planning to reopen schools last fall.

"The educational issues have come about because of this pandemic, and the pandemic is a health issue, so it's very important to utilize the people that you already have in your school district to help make those decisions," Hall said.

Also receiving the honor are Dr. Benjamin Lee and Dr. William Raszka Jr., pediatric infectious disease specialists at the University of Vermont Medical Center.

Started in 2000, the award recognizes people outside the nursing field who support the role of school nurses. It's named after Dr. James Stackpole, one of the first pediatricians in Vermont, was a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and, according to Hall, instrumental in writing the original school health manual. According to Hall, there are more than 250 nursing school nurses currently working in the state.

Normally awarded to a single person, Hall said VSSNA decided to recognize multiple people in 2020, noting that Collins, Lee and Raszka "came immediately to the top."

Hall said she got to know Collins during the past year through their mutual involvement with the state's Strong and Healthy Start workgroup, which wrote the guidelines for reopening schools, and the secretary of education's weekly advisory council.

She said Collins has also been regular attendee at the VSSNA's weekly town halls throughout the pandemic.

"Jeanne ... asks great questions and really offers amazing support to the school nurses," she said.

Melanie Parker, COVID-19 coordinator for RNESU and a nurse at Lothrop Elementary in Pittsford, said Collins deserves the honor for her willingness to listen to what district nurses were telling her.

“I just was impressed with the way she listened and really accepted the recommendations of the school nurses,” she said.

Parker, who serves as RNESU’s school nurse liaison to the administration as well, admitted “it has been a very complicated year,” but credited Collins with keeping things on track from the start.

“She got our district COVID task force together early. She’s been right on top of all the guidance from the Agency of Education and the Department of Health,” Parker said.

RNESU started the school year with four nurses, but Parker said Collins soon added a fifth after realizing having Parker splitting her time between two different schools was not an ideal arrangement.

Parker noted this school year has raised awareness of all the work school nurses do.

“People think school nurses put on Band-Aids and help kids with upset stomachs. The role is really much bigger than that, and I think that became very clear during this pandemic,” she said. “Jeanne seemed to understand that from the start and appreciate it. She used the school nurses as a resource.”

Collins said she was “thrilled and honored” to receive the award particularly because of the company she is in.

“Drs. Lee and Raszka have been sitting on the state guidance task force with me and I am just so impressed with their knowledge. So to be lumped in with that group makes me even more honored,” she said.

Collins said she sees the award as an opportunity to shine a light back on school nurses.

“The award is to me, but it really highlights our school nurses, and school nurses, pre-COVID, did not get a whole lot of appreciation and attention. It’s about time.”

Like all Vermont superintendents, Collins spent last summer working with her district team to develop a plan for a safe return to school when much about the virus was still unknown.

When RNESU reopened in September, it did so with a mostly in-person model for its five elementary schools — four days in the classroom and Wednesdays remote. Otter Valley Union Middle and High School, meanwhile, was on a hybrid model alternating in-person and remote days. An all-remote option was offered for all grades as well.

While Collins noted COVID still got into schools, the plan allowed the district to limit and control exposure to the virus by being able to quarantine a classroom or learning pod without impacting an entire building.

She said the worst situation so far came a couple of weeks ago when several grades at Lothrop had to quarantine. Otherwise, cases have been largely isolated.

Collins credited families with helping to keep things under control.

“Our parents have been really great partners in calling the school if their child has a symptom or if there’s an outbreak in their family,” she said.

But even though RNESU staff have started to get vaccinated and there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel, Collins acknowledged there will still likely be quarantines this year.

“I worry that people forget that,” she said. “This wasn’t about just school staff being vaccinated. The spread goes way beyond that. So we’re still going to see those shutdowns, but I think that we have a pretty good system in place.”