

Barstow community debates school choice

09-10-2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabataseo

CHITTENDEN — Barstow School District residents like their school choice options just the way they are.

That sentiment was expressed by a majority of the nearly 30 people who spoke at a virtual public forum Thursday evening hosted by the Barstow Unified Union School District Board.

(BUUSD, which is made up of the towns of Chittenden and Mendon, is one of two school districts within the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union.)

More than 80 people attended the forum, which was broadcast live on Zoom.

Historically, BUUSD has been an open-choice district, meaning that students within it can attend any public or independent high school they like — in and out of state.

However, the board recently floated the idea of limiting school choice options to three: Rutland High School, Otter Valley Union High School and Proctor High School.

In Vermont, a student living in a town without its own high school is able to apply for a tuition voucher to attend one elsewhere. For a student tuitioned at a public school, a town pays the receiving district the equivalent of that district's average per pupil costs. For independent schools, a student receives a voucher worth up to the average announced tuition for Vermont public schools or the independent school's tuition, whichever is less. For the 2021-22 school year, the average announced tuition for grades 7-12 is \$16,842.

For more than 20 years, religious schools have been excluded as a school choice option; however, an April ruling by State Board of Education (BOE) in which it ordered three school districts to pay tuition requests made by families living in choice towns who were seeking to attend Catholic schools, has put the option back on the table. At the time of the ruling, the BOE argued that excluding the schools would essentially be discriminatory, but it also stressed that its ruling was not setting precedent.

The current conversation at Barstow began in June when the School Board met to consider adopting a resolution drafted by the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA), which requested, in part, that the General Assembly “guarantee, through law, that all public and independent schools receiving public funds adopt and exercise, equal and equitable opportunities in admissions, programs and practices in order to operate in the state of Vermont.”

In discussing the resolution, Board Chair Brenda Hummel said the board realized that its current open-school choice model was not aligned with the district's equity policy, which addresses institutional biases that may affect students' academic outcomes.

"After much discussion, the board questioned whether a public school district has the capacity to know if all nonpublic schools are adhering to this standard. And we don't," Hummel said in a Friday interview.

Hummel said the board's decision to limit school choice to three local public high schools was developed as a possible solution to the "equity dilemma."

The three specific schools were chosen because, according to district data, 95% of Barstow Memorial School graduates who chose public schools choose one of those three, with the majority choosing RHS.

While the board voted unanimously to support the VSBA resolution, it concluded it was necessary to hear from district residents.

On Thursday, a number of residents challenged how the board was defining equity.

Terry Corsones, of Mendon, contended that limiting where students may choose to attend high school was, in fact, inequitable.

"High schools vary. Because a student's interests and abilities also vary, it's only common sense that it's beneficial to offer students a wide variety of choices to best fit their unique interests and abilities," she said. "To claim that limiting your choice is somehow in the interest of equity begs the question: Whose equity?"

Chittenden resident Lisa Purcell, who was a School Board member during the Act 46 merger process that created the BUUSD, spoke in support of the proposed change. "My biggest concern about continuing to funnel our public tax dollars to private schools is that it is a drain on our public schools," she said, arguing that tuition sent to independent schools take money away from public school operating costs, resulting in higher taxes for property owners.

Sara Tully, town administrator for Mendon, said she frequently hears from residents who have chosen to move to Mendon because of Barstow's strong reputation as a K-8 school and the open-choice option.

"Limiting school choice will directly impact the enrollment at Barstow, as well as negatively impact the property values of both (Mendon and Chittenden)," she said.

Chris Bianchi, a real estate agent who lives in Killington, echoed Tully's statement.

“I want you all to realize that you have something that’s very valuable, and that is school choice. I show property to so many people that are looking for towns that provide school choice,” he said.

A number of speakers also took issue with a letter the School Board distributed ahead of the forum, which broadly characterized independent schools as discriminatory.

“Private schools do not enroll students who require services beyond basic education services and many have by-laws that deny access to particular groups of students by such factors as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, culture, ability or accessibility needs, socioeconomic status, citizenship, creed, religion, tribal status,” it read.

It also claimed that many private schools are not affordable for all families.

Chittenden resident Gina Ottoboni called the letter “problematic.”

“Those statements set up a false dichotomy that public schools are equitable and private schools aren’t. And that’s not a true statement,” she said.

Others characterized the letter as “false” and “misleading,” and requested the School Board provide evidence to back up its claims.

Hummel acknowledged that the document’s language, which she said was adapted from the district’s equity policy, upset some people.

“We didn’t in any way intend to disparage any particular schools,” she said. “We were trying to communicate our policy — that it’s our duty to be able to say that our students are free of these biases. And when we send our students to a school — a nonpublic school — we can’t know that. ... All we know is that public schools prohibit biases based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, etc. And public schools accept all students.”

The board will revisit the school choice discussion at its next meeting on Sept. 20. Between now and then, Hummel said, the board will continue to accept input from residents. The district will also release a “frequently asked questions” document that will address some of the common concerns residents have raised.

Hummel said the board will either decide to drop the matter entirely, leaving the school choice model as is, or put the question directly to the voters. Either way, she said she hopes to have it settled in the next month or two.

“There would not, probably, be a benefit to dragging it out any longer unless new information came up,” she said.

