

Collins to retire in June

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BRANDON — After 41 years in education, Jeanne Collins, superintendent at Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, is planning to move on.

Collins said Tuesday she will be retired come June 30. She informed the RNSU board and the Otter Valley Unified School District board of her decision last week, along with staff and parents.

“I just finally came to the conclusion that it’s time to shift my priorities to me, and therefore the district deserves somebody who’s going to give it 100%, which I have always done and will keep doing through June, but it’s time for me to shift my priorities and focus on family.”

Collins said her first gig as a teacher was when she was 7 years old.

“I ran a summer school program in my backyard for 25 cents a week per child,” she said. “My grandmother was a teacher. I guess I always wanted to be a teacher.”

She’d purchase grade books for use in her backyard school.

“I’d make up an entire class, and I’d play school. Some people played house, I played school,” she said.

A native of Indiana, Collins graduated from Purdue University with a degree in elementary education and speech-language pathology. Her first job was in Los Angeles County, where she taught children with emotional disturbances.

Her career saw her teaching in California, Colorado, then Arizona. She became an administrator in Arizona where she met her partner, a native of Barre. They came to Vermont 27 years ago, where Collins worked as head of the special education department at Harwood Union High School. She then became a superintendent in the Burlington area and has been with the RNSU since 2014.

Collins said she’s proud of her work seeing the district through the Act 46 merger, which involved eight towns, 11 school boards, and 44 school board members. Collins said the merger has made the district stronger and better for staff and students.

“Each town made its own decisions which created truly an inequity of opportunities for the kids in the supervisory union because it was dependent upon your zip code what was going to be offered to you,” she said. “So spearheading the merger under Act 46 and what came out of that was real equity of opportunity, elementary school choice, being able to really look, a line item budgeting process with an equity lens, our

small schools did not have a guidance counselor, did not have a librarian, just bits and pieces of arts and music. But now that we've merged the districts and we know what everybody has, kids have access to the same support services as every other school. All of our elementary schools now offer Spanish, not just the one town that wanted to pay for it."

Being merged also allows the schools to move staff around more easily, she said.

Collins said she wanted to see the district completely through the pandemic and into recovery, but COVID-19 is still around. She's proud of how the district responded to the pandemic, from bus drivers shifting to delivering food to teachers learning to do their work remotely as they did it.

"It's just very impressive how people stepped up and did what needed to be done," she said.

Collins said she's advised the RNSU to hire a consultant to help with searching for a new superintendent.

"That would be my advice, make sure you are listening to what the administration wants, to what teachers and staff want, and what students and parents feel they need," she said.

Whoever fills her role, she said, should understand the community cares deeply about its schools and building relationships with that community will be key. She said those relationships are what she'll miss about the job.

Laurie Bertrand, chair of the Otter Valley and RNSU boards, said Tuesday she was serving on the Sudbury School Board when Collins was hired. Board members were impressed by what people she'd worked with in Burlington were saying about her.

"She does everything she can for kids, they're her main focus, while making sure the administration can get everything done that they need to do," said Bertrand. "She's just absolutely wonderful."

Collins was key in getting leaders in merged districts to work well together, according to Bertrand.

"I'm looking for a strong leader that is going to make sure kids have what they need to be successful, and that doesn't mean just college ready that means making sure they're ready for whatever the next phase is of their life, whether they're going to become a plumber or an electrician, work in the convenience store or start their own business, whatever is it, whatever they need to be successful, we provide that, and I need a superintendent who's going to help us do that," said Bertrand.