

RNESU Superintendent Jeanné Collins to step down

12-01-2021, Mountain Times, by Angelo Lynn

BRANDON — After 41 years as an educator, including 17 years as a superintendent, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanné Collins, 63, last Friday announced her resignation at the end of this school year. She said her decision was prompted by a change in her personal life.

“It’s bittersweet. It’s hard to let go,” Collins said, “but I’d like a different work-life balance.”



Submitted

Jeanné Collins

Collins is engaged to be married to Mike Deweese, director of the Vermont Superintendents Association Leadership Academy, this coming May. Collins lives in Shelburne and Deweese is in Enosburg Falls.

Collins became the superintendent of RNEsu in 2014, a move from the Burlington school district that she said was the “right decision for me” because of RNEsu’s size and its role in the community. It was “the idea that the schools are such a huge part of the community... I love the ability to make a difference at the relationship level, and to do it in such a tight-knit community.”

“I love Rutland Northeast. It’s a fabulous district. I have a great team here, the people really care about their schools.... It’s been a dream job for me, even while navigating Covid. But we’re on a good path right now,” she said, “we have the right people in place. It’s a good district for a new superintendent to move into.”

School board chair Laurie Bertrand of Brandon noted that Collins had led the district “through the Act 46 merger of schools and a global pandemic... has implemented a budgeting process that focuses on equity of opportunity for students including elementary school choice, [instigated] a multi-year facility planning process, and she has hired a top notch administrative team.”

“Jeanné is a dynamic leader,” Bertrand continued. “She has embraced our SU like family and she will be sorely missed. In her eight years in the SU, we have become a single school community and have focused our schools on academic achievement and belonging. We wish her well in her retirement.” Collins’s retirement is effective June 30, 2022.

“Jeanné has been our rock for the past eight years. She has quietly and steadfastly helped us move our district forward while always remembering that what we do is ultimately for our students,” Bertrand added.

Fully engaged

Anyone who knows Collins recognizes that she is fully engaged in her work in an all-consuming way. She admits as much.

"I don't do the job lightly," she said. "Could I do it lighter, probably. But I don't. It's not who I am."

Asked about her notable achievements, she cited the school mergers shortly after Act 46 was passed.

"With the help of business manager Brenda Fleming and an innovative board," Collins said, "we spent the fall of 2015 studying the idea of a merged school system, pros and cons, and ultimately brought the concept to the voters, who passed it overwhelmingly that January to take effect that next July 2016. It was a very fast turnaround and I am proud of how we were able to meet that need... The merger also opened up other possibilities for us. Focusing on early childhood learning and knowing 10 hours a week of subsidized preK was not possible for some parents due to transportation needs, we went out and sought a private child care partner to share Whiting School with. A.R.K. has run a full-day childcare upstairs at Whiting for several years now, while we run a preK class downstairs. This model allows more families to access both childcare and a quality preK program without needing to worry about transportation and other concerns. I am very proud of this model."

On another issue, Collins noted that "RNESU has long been a proponent of equity, yet like most districts, our practices have not always shown this. We believe in building a culture of kindness from a young age and developing pride in our middle and high school students. The idea that all students belong is part of our very culture, yet we continue to hit barriers, like last spring's Pride march that we need to work through. Last year, we ended the practice of gender based graduation gown colors and went to a full class color instead. We started an equity committee to help us look at our practices and make changes in order to walk our own talk.

Summing up some of the eight years at RNESU, Collins wrote: "Together we have merged our schools with community support under Act 46; created a budget process that looks at equity of opportunity and offerings within our schools while still respecting their different characters; implemented elementary school choice; improved our facilities, particularly Otter Valley UHS front entrance, ADA accessibility and auditorium; and are on our way to more effectively using data and a tiered system of supports in academics and social emotional learning to impact student growth."

In addition, she said, a core focus was on "building a sense of community all with the focus on our mission — providing a quality education for the students."

Even during the pandemic, she said, that sense of community came through when district bus drivers would deliver school lunches to the homes of district students. "For a lot of those students it was the highlight of their days," she said, noting it was the connection to the school that meant so much to the kids.

"And I'm not done," Collins emphasized. "My intention is to leave the school district in as good a position as possible. We have to be sure the systems of support are all in place; that Covid protocols are managed and working well."

Collins said she anticipates a rough eight weeks ahead in terms of the spread of the Delta variant of the coronavirus, but says the district is as ready for the challenge as they can be. She also said the pandemic forced changes that present new opportunities.

"Covid has changed the landscape for teaching and education in this country," she said. "We're now in a struggle with how to make this transformation to digital learning ... the focus is on student passions, not rote learning; and on how to make learning available to all ... Covid taught us there is more than one way to learn, that there are many different ways for kids to learn and that the traditional model of learning while in a desk doesn't work for everyone ... This is our opportunity to change the dynamic from seat time, to technology-based learning and mastery learning."

Highlights/challenges

Of the highlights during her tenure, Collins said she "loves walking into our schools and seeing students and teachers connecting, hear the hum of learning and laughter. I thrive in schools and I enjoy my work."

Of the challenges she has faced over the years, she cites a few.

“That it never turns off, 24/7, vacation or not, I am responsible for the district and that feeling of responsibility never leaves me,” she said. “During Covid, in the early months in particular, I lost a lot of sleep trying to figure out how best to educate in the 2020-2021 school year. I knew not everyone would agree with my decisions, but I tried to keep all staff in a job, the school communities safe, and pivot to teaching remotely with no notice.

“I am proud of what we did together — students, staff, parents, administration. It took a village and still does today,” she said. “This year, I am responding to positive cases on weekends and vacation days. It is never ending, honestly.”

That dedication to the job and to the school district has not gone unnoticed.

For Collins it’s an opportunity to seek other avenues in academics, perhaps from a regional or national perspective, while also backing off a little.

“It was not an easy decision to make,” she said. “I suppose everyone has to walk away sometime and I am glad the district is in a really good place.... I won’t miss Sunday night preparations for the week; I won’t miss calling snow days — getting up at 4 a.m. and making the calls and emails until 6.

“But I am going to miss the community.”