A New School Year, and a Chance to Think About What Comes Next

By: Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

There is a particular feeling that comes with the beginning of a school year. Even after thirty years in education, I still feel it.

The quiet hallways that were empty for much of the summer begin to fill again. Classrooms that have been carefully prepared are waiting for students. Buses are being cleaned and checked. Teachers are wondering how much their students have grown since June, and imagining the faces of the new students they will meet for the first time. And then, almost all at once, the quiet disappears. There is the first morning rush. There are hugs and nervous smiles. There are students who cannot wait to see their friends and others who are not quite sure they are ready for another school year. There is laughter in the hallways, the sound of backpacks zipping open and shut, and the familiar rhythm of a school community coming back together.

I love that feeling, and no matter how many years I experience it, it never becomes dull. Because the start of each new school year reminds us that, in looking ahead, for ourselves and our students, we find so much promise.

And this year in particular, as we welcome our students back to the schools we know and love, I would like to invite us all to think about the schools they will need in the future.

This year, RSU 5 has embarked on a comprehensive **Systems & Sustainability Study.** The name is intentional. This is not simply a facilities study. It is not a referendum on a particular school configuration or a decision about one particular issue. And it is not about starting with an answer and asking the community to choose among a set of predetermined solutions.

Rather, this is a deliberate, careful step to consider RSU 5 as a whole system.

We are asking some fundamental questions about where we are today, where we are headed, and what kind of school system we want to sustain for the future. We will examine the many pieces that make up that system: enrollment and demographics, educational programming, staffing and organizational structures, early childhood, transportation, facilities, finances, and other factors that affect our ability to provide strong and equitable opportunities for students.

Importantly, as we ask what might change, we need to understand what matters most—what we must preserve in the face of changing times.

That is where our communities come in.

This September, we will hold three community forums—one in each of the towns served by RSU 5. These will not be meetings where we ask people to vote on whether a particular school should open, close, move, or change grade levels.

Instead, we want to listen. And we have some compelling questions:

What do we most want to preserve about our schools?

Looking ahead five to ten years, where do we think RSU 5 most needs to change?

What do we value most when we think about our children's education and our schools?

And perhaps most importantly:

What are we willing to trade off when the things we value come into conflict?

These questions matter because it is easy to say that we want everything. Our decisions will rest in the way we weigh competing values. We want excellent and varied educational opportunities. We want strong community connections. We want schools that feel personal and welcoming. We want local access. We want financial responsibility. We want strong facilities. We want equity. We want to attract and retain talented educators.

Of course we want all of these important outcomes.

The hardest and most important conversation begins when those priorities don't all point in the same direction. This requires groundedness, patience, listening, and a willingness to think beyond our individual perspectives.

In my view, responsible stewardship of RSU 5 demands that we not overlook the people and organizational structures behind everything we do. How should RSU 5 organize people and services so that we make the best use of our resources while providing strong and equitable experiences for students, now and in the future?

These are systems questions. They are also community questions.

Join the Conversation

I hope you will join us at one of our three community forums:

Friday, September 18
Pownal Elementary School
6:00–7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, September 22
Durham Community School
6:00–7:30 p.m.

Thursday, September 24
Freeport High School
6:00–7:30 p.m.

Please note that the Pownal forum that was originally scheduled for Monday, September 21 has been moved to Friday, September 18.

At each forum, we will provide information about the study and then spend time listening to community members. We will ask questions such as:

- What is most important for RSU 5 to preserve?
- Where do you think RSU 5 most needs to change over the next five to ten years?
- When important priorities conflict, what should guide our decisions?
- What possibilities should we consider that we haven't talked about?

There will also be opportunities to contribute if you cannot attend a forum.

I hope people will come with strong opinions. I hope they will also come with curiosity. I hope parents will come, but so will people without children in our schools. I hope current staff will participate, but so will former educators and community members who have watched our schools change over decades. I hope students and recent graduates will have a voice. And I hope we will hear from people who don't always attend school meetings.

We will not necessarily agree. That is okay. In fact, it is part of the point.

The community's role in this process is not to design the ultimate solution. It is to help us understand our collective values, priorities, concerns, hopes, and willingness to consider change. The study team will then take that information, combine it with data and analysis, and help us understand what different models might actually look like and what their consequences might be.

That distinction is important. We should not make significant decisions about the future of our schools simply because something has always been done a certain way. But neither should we change something simply because change itself feels productive.

We need to be thoughtful and courageous about both. We need to hold humility in one hand and aspiration in the other, at the same time.

I believe deeply in what we have built in RSU 5. That is precisely why I believe we owe it to our students and our communities to think carefully about what comes next. A new school year reminds us that every generation of students gets only one chance to experience these years. Our responsibility is to make sure that the systems we create around them are worthy of that opportunity.

So as we welcome everyone back, let's celebrate what is good about our schools. Let's appreciate the traditions and relationships that make each of our communities special. And let's also be willing to ask hard questions about the future. Not because we know where those questions will lead us, but because our curiosity and willingness to engage with the prospect of thoughtful change is an investment in the children who are about to walk through our doors.