What We Owe Our Children

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What Do We Owe Our Children?

I think there are few sights more endearing than a queue of new pre-kindergarten students learning how to line up in school. Finding the marks on the floor. Learning where to stow their things. Figuring out how to move through a hallway together. Making one of the biggest transitions of their new and promising lives. As I move through our schools in RSU 5, I am mindful of the journey our students and families make as they advance from one school to the next. Those pre-kindergarten students, who are just beginning to develop a sense of themselves as learners, will have countless opportunities to discover who they are and what they are capable of as they move through our schools.

We want to nurture every latent talent, spark every curiosity and support every aspiration. That is what we owe our children. And as our district undertakes the timely and consequential work of a Systems and Sustainability Study, which will help inform the long-term decisions that will determine what those pre-kindergarten students experience in RSU 5 until they graduate from high school, I find myself returning to a fundamental question:

What does our community, through its stewardship of our schools, owe those children and their families?

I use the word "owe" not in the sense of financial obligation or indebtedness, although responsible financial stewardship is certainly part of that mission. I mean it more broadly. What do we owe our children as individuals? Not because they are our future, but because they are our community *now*.

Last week, during a meeting of our Early Childhood Task Force, we wrestled with a question that will become increasingly important as we expand our services for younger children: How do we become more efficient as a system? How can we expand the scope of services we offer to meet this need while also being mindful of the needs at every other level of education in RSU 5?

It is a natural question. We have finite resources. We have buildings with limitations. We have staffing challenges. We have growing responsibilities, including the responsibility to meet the special education needs of three- and four-year-olds. As I sat with the question of efficiency, I was struck that my first thoughts were not actually about dollars or buildings or staffing models. I thought about children. About children as individuals. As learners.

The greatest efficiency we can find, I believe, is to raise young children who see themselves as capable, curious learners.

That is an investment that pays dividends year after year. A child who believes that school is a place where they belong, where questions are welcomed, where mistakes are part of learning and where

their interests matter is a child more likely to engage deeply in school. That confidence can carry from pre-kindergarten to elementary school, from middle school to high school and ultimately into whatever comes next.

So where does that begin?

It begins with a vision of school that sees children as complex individuals, right from the outset. Every child comes to us with different hopes, interests, abilities, needs, fears and dreams. That is not an obstacle to education. It is the reason education is so interesting in the first place. The magic of a school is that a child can walk through its doors not knowing yet what they will be good at, what will capture their imagination, who they will become or what contribution they might someday make. Our job is not to answer those questions for them. Our job is to create the conditions in which they can begin answering them for themselves. Fortunately, RSU 5 is a district that takes that charge seriously. It is reflected in our Strategic Plan, which places considerable emphasis on experiential, place-based and interdisciplinary learning and recognizes the social and emotional well-being of students as foundational to their success as learners and as people.

More importantly, it shows up in the adults who work in our schools. I cannot say enough about the culture of continuous learning and the commitment to nurturing that I see in our educators. Teaching is, of course, at the center of what schools do. But the most effective teaching helps children learn something about themselves and their capabilities. I can testify that in RSU 5, in every one of our schools, this ethos drives the way adults support children and each other.

And all of this work in our schools is, in turn, a reflection of the community that surrounds them. It reflects a deeply embedded belief that our obligation to our children is one of our deepest purposes as a community– which brings us back to the central question. *What do we, as a community, owe our children?*

This year, RSU 5 is undertaking a Systems and Sustainability Study that will ask fundamental questions about the future of our schools. How should our schools be organized? How do we make the best use of our buildings and resources? How do we sustain the programs and experiences we value? What will our students and families need from us five, ten or twenty years from now? And perhaps most importantly, how do we make choices that are both educationally sound and financially responsible? These are not easy questions. They shouldn't be.

The children standing in that pre-kindergarten line today will live with the consequences of the decisions we make now long after many of us have moved on. They will experience the schools we choose to sustain, the opportunities we choose to create, the buildings we choose to maintain and the tradeoffs we choose to make. This is the most important lens through which to view this hard work– not our tax bills.

Our obligation to those children is to engage in this hard work now. To listen carefully. To ask difficult questions. To be willing to challenge our own assumptions. To make responsible choices with a fair and curious frame of mind, recognizing that reasonable people can look at the same set of circumstances and see different possibilities.

When those pre-kindergarten students eventually walk across a stage to graduate from high school, we should be able to look back at the decisions we made today and know that we did not defer the hardest conversations or the most difficult choices simply because they were difficult. We should be able to say that we listened, that we considered the possibilities honestly, that we took seriously the resources entrusted to us, and that we kept the children in front of us as our north star. And that every decision was calculated to help every child see themselves as a learner with a bright future.

That is what stewardship means, and that is what we owe them.