What Does It Mean to Value Education?

By: Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

Lately, I have found myself reflecting on the role of education in our national life and what it means for a community to truly value it. I come to that question from several perspectives: decades spent as a teacher and school administrator, my current role as a superintendent, years as the parent of three children who grew up in public schools, and my own lifelong journey as a learner. Each has shaped my understanding of the purpose and promise of education. As a superintendent, I am also compelled to look beyond individual classrooms and schools and consider education as a vital system that helps define a community. It is one of the most significant collective investments a community makes, not simply in its children, but in the kind of community it wants to be and the values and aspirations it hopes to carry forward. This month, I want to explore what that means in the everyday work of our schools and, in particular, in how we value the people who make that work possible.

I spent many years as a classroom teacher before moving into school administration. It was work that became integral to my identity. I know the particular privilege of being invited into the lives of young people at a time when they are figuring out who they are and who they might become. Teaching is about much more than the subjects we teach. It is about cultivating curiosity, empathy, acceptance, and a passion for learning. It is about seeing potential in children, sometimes before they see it in themselves, and creating the conditions in which they can discover it.

As a parent, I experienced that relationship from the other side. I knew what it meant to send my children off to school each day, trusting that the adults who spent their time with them would recognize their individuality, encourage their interests, challenge them, and care about them. Like most parents, I had moments of deep gratitude for the educators in my children's lives, and also moments of deep frustration when my children struggled with something in school. Either way, I understood that the people teaching my children were influencing far more than my children's knowledge and skills.. They were helping shape how my children saw themselves and the world around them.

Those perspectives have stayed with me. They have given me an enduring appreciation for the work of educators and for the professional knowledge, skill, and personal commitment that work demands. Teaching is a craft. It requires knowledge, judgment, creativity, patience, and an ongoing commitment to learning. Some of its most important work happens quietly, in relationships and conversations that never show up in an assessment or an annual report. It happens when a teacher recognizes that a child needs something different, when a student discovers a new interest, or when a young person begins to believe in their own abilities.

I believe that, as a society, we need to do a better job of elevating and honoring that work. That means more than occasional expressions of appreciation. It means recognizing the expertise educators bring to their work, respecting their professionalism, seeking their perspectives, and

giving teaching and learning a central place in our public conversations. Educators should be among the people we look to when we talk about the kind of community we want to build and the kind of society we want to become.

This matters particularly now. At a time when public discourse is increasingly marked by division, distrust, and too often a diminished regard for expertise and those who serve others, we should be especially mindful of the institutions and relationships that bring us together. Public education is one of those institutions. At their best, schools are places where curiosity is encouraged, differences are respected, possibilities are explored, and every child is regarded as someone worthy of our time, attention, and belief. If we truly value education, that belief should be evident in how we speak about educators, how we listen to them, and the respect we afford their work and professional judgment. Their work is not simply important to our schools. It is important to the fabric of our communities.

I have spent much of my adult life in schools, and I suppose that has given me a particular appreciation for the people who choose to make this their life's work. I have also seen how much of a difference one educator can make in the life of a child. I imagine most of us can think of someone who made that kind of difference in our own lives. Take a moment to think about that person. What was it about them that stayed with you? What did they give you that you still carry today? And perhaps most importantly, how would you want that person, and the work they devoted themselves to, to be recognized and honored? How might we extend that same recognition and respect to the educators who are making a difference in the lives of children today? I know I am grateful for the educators who have made a difference in my life, in the lives of my children, and in the lives of so many young people in our communities. As we continue to shape the identity of RSU 5, I hope we continue to recognize and honor the profound importance of teaching and learning, and the people who dedicate themselves to that work, in the life of our community.