

## Lifting Bennington by Raising Education

By Thomas A. Dee

Last month, I attended a public forum on economic development for the greater Bennington community. As the chief executive officer of the largest employer in Bennington County, I can say economic development is extremely important to our health system. A community with a strong economic base is usually also a healthier one. At the forum, I made a brief public comment that the perceptions of our local educational system are holding our community back.

As we continue to recruit new doctors and other professional staff, the quality of the Bennington school system gets mentioned often. Prospective professionals want a top-notch school system. They frequently say that they are considering living in Manchester or Williamstown, because they feel these towns have stronger school systems. On the whole, Burr and Burton and Mount Greylock students outscore Mount Anthony students in reading, math, and science (available statistics from [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org)).

Some may write off the school system based on this evidence alone. But, overall scores don't tell the whole story. Mount Anthony offers 11 advanced placement (AP) courses. In 2011, more than 60 percent of the AP students scored a 3 or higher on their AP tests. Those scores count for credit at many universities. So clearly, schools in Bennington turn out many excellent students who can and do succeed at the nation's top universities. The truth is, Mount Anthony and the schools that feed it do very well educating many students. Unfortunately, there is also a sizable number of students who are falling through the cracks.

As a community, we need to begin a serious conversation about what is causing many of our children to fall behind. We all care about Bennington, our schools, our teachers, and most of all, our children. For this conversation to lead to a better school system, we must avoid several pitfalls:

We must avoid thinking money is the solution. It's not. As health care has proven, spending more money on something doesn't necessarily make it better.

We must not be deterred by the difficulties of poverty. Yes, Bennington's schools have a lot of children living in poverty. Poverty makes education more challenging. However, other schools have achieved solid results in communities with higher rates of poverty.

We must avoid the blame game: blaming each other, the teachers, the leadership, our elected officials, federal legislation, or the system. Blame forces people into opposing camps and isolates the very people who must come together to work on the problem and solve it.

We must avoid pinning our hopes on a single fix, for no single idea or person will come to our rescue. Ideas and models provide guidance. People do the work. No matter how good the idea is, it's the people who implement it that make it succeed or fail.

It is time for our community to pull together and pursue a broad array of ideas to build on the strong educational foundation laid by our hardworking professional educators. It will require leadership, listening, and compromise from educators, the business community, and our elected officials. It also means that parents and the public must step forward to support this effort each step of the way. Together we can make Bennington better for all.

We are not experts in education at Southwestern Vermont Health Care, but we are willing to lend a helping hand because we believe that our community and all its students can succeed.

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