For MRVI folks meeting on June 6, 2024

Near the close of our last meeting (May second) there was a discussion about the state’s process for filling the position of Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Education, a spot that was empty almost an entire year before the Governor recently appointed as an interim hire Zoe Saunders, one of the three persons recommended to him by the State Board of Education. As much as 3 months passed between that Board submission and the Governor’s announcement of his choice.

Apparently, during that period, persons critical of Ms Saunders’ selection were canvassing members of the Vermont Senate who were soon to cast a vote endorsing the Governor’s choice. When the Senate voted to reject his choice, Governor Scott overroad that rejection by appointing her as an *interim* Secretary.

It’s important to note that the roles of the State Board of Education, the Governor and the Senate all are prescribed in Vermont education policy.

Critiques of the mandated presentation by State Board members to the Governor of names of three persons vetted by that Board could have been made at any time in the past year while that process was playing out. Instead, persons opposed to his selection of Ms Saunders waited until Gov. Scott had offered her the job and the Governor had notified the Senate, expecting that body to give its usual (non-controversial) endorsement.

Senators were contacted by opponents who asked them to reject Ms Saunders’ nomination on

the basis of inaccurate and incomplete information about her career. (BTW, a Seven Days reporter, no doubt sensing the possibility of a partisan political fight, published an article at the time that repeated that inaccurate and misleading information. It doesn’t appear that the reporter attempted to verify the accuracy of that information.)

**Inaccurate:** Senators were told Ms Saunders had no public school experience when her resume documents some seven years of employment within a state education agency.

**Misleading**: Senators were told she had no classroom teaching experience even though the State Board of Education had recommended her as one of the three finalists in their job search without requiring that as a qualifying criterion. (Had the Board considered that essential, they would have rejected her application at an early stage. Instead, there’s a good case to be made that the qualities for serving--and excelling—as a chief state education officer are very different than those that distinguish classroom teachers.) To support this contention, I quote (with permission) from a letter several Senators received in advance of the scheduled vote.

*As one who has had a long tenure at the AOE under many commissioners/secretaries, I do not believe experience as a teacher, principal, or even superintendent is necessary to be a good leader of a state education agency. Our role is quite different and the skills and expertise* *needed to lead an SEA* [State Education Agency] *effectively are different.*

*I respect the Senate’s role in this process and encourage you to ask her probing questions. However, I strongly urge you not to make your decision prior to hearing from her directly. I fear that this strategy of guilt by association, which I have typically associated with the far right, is being used here by perhaps well-intentioned but overzealous and ill-informed people.*

As an MRVI member, I would add to the charge of inaccurate and misleading information being employed in this selection process that I believe ignorant bias also played a role in the Senate’s deliberation. I have heard a number of Valley folks, including some classroom teachers, say they are “sure” that Ms Saunders ascribes to education policies espoused by the current Florida governor. Her positions can be viewed online, and I urge everyone to look there before repeating this aspersion.

Thanks for reading, friends.

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