

Q&A

David Clark Business and School Boards



David Clark, 59 this month, lives in Westminster West, and has served on the Bellows Falls Union High School board regularly for over 20 years, currently as chairman.

He was born and raised in Bronxville, NY, and attended one of the best public high schools in the nation. He came to Vermont in 1972 to attend Windham College, and has lived in Vermont since then.

He owns and operates Sports Car Services, repairing and restoring British sports cars of the 1945 to 1980 vintage. The company does all aspects of restoration except what Clark refers to as "paint and fender work," which they subcontract.

VBM: When I was a reporter for the *Rutland Herald*, which was at least 10 years ago, you were serving on the school board then. How long have you been a school board member, David?

Clark: To the best of my recollection, Robert, I was first elected to the Westminster Town School Board in 1988. There was a dust up going on here in town over the administrative leadership and Clare Ogelsby, who was the lead teacher at the Westminster West Elementary School, asked me to run. I served a two-year term and then a three-year term, and then I got the bounce while they were arguing over the Bellows Falls Middle School in the mid 1990s. I was on sabbatical when (teacher and board member) a board member left and I was asked to fill in. Then I ran again and was elected, ran after that and got the boot, and ran once again and got back on the board in 2005. In 2007 I ascended to the

chair of the Bellows Falls Union High School Board, then in 2008 I lost to Dan Axtell. Now when I go to school board meetings I gaze across the table and see both of my Westminster colleagues, both of whom have defeated me in contested elections. So, I've been on and off. I was on from '88 to '93, was re-appointed in '94, ran again in '95 and lost, and most recently I ran and won and I'm in my third year in my current three-year term.

VBM: And you're on which board at this time?

Clark: The Bellows Falls Union High School Board. The school serves the towns of Rockingham Westminster, Grafton and Athens.

VBM: You've got well over 20 years experience on school boards. Over those years there have been a lot of issues that have come and gone. What

He started the company in 1987, and now has several full and part time employees. He said the company stemmed from a practical need because in 1969 his first car was an MG and he couldn't afford to have someone else work on it, so he developed an expertise in all things involving British sports cars.

He is the father of four grown children, a daughter and three sons.

He says his main hobby as "fixing fence," a reference to his raising dairy stock on his Westminster land for local dairy farms for many years.

Robert Smith interviewed Clark at his company office in Westminster West.

do you see as the consistent, main issues schools face?

Clark: The biggest main issue is what I would call educational outcomes. Trying to give kids an adequate education so that they are competitive in the 21st Century.

VBM: What can a school board do to achieve that?

Clark: The longer you work on the high school board the more you start to realize that one of the things you need to do is to work with the school boards at the sending schools. We try to work very closely with the Rockingham School Board because most of our kids come out of the Bellows Falls Middle School. But we realize that Bellows Falls Middle School outcomes are very much influenced by the outcomes in the elementary schools.

VBM: How many schools are involved in sending kids to BFUHS?

Clark: Politically, there are one rep each on the board from Athens and Grafton, three from Westminster and five from Rockingham. So there's a big town, small town balance of sorts.

VBM: Is there still a grade school in Athens or did that combine with Grafton?

Clark: Athens has entered into an agreement with Grafton and they operate as a joint compact district. What that means is that there is a board that operates the school with representation from both towns.

VBM: So, there is an elementary school in Grafton, one in Saxtons River, one in Bellows Falls and two in Westminster.

Clark: Bellows Falls Central School

is elementary, K to fourth grade, with Bellows Falls Middle School its grades five to eight. Whereas I think Saxtons River is grades K to six. Westminster is K to six, although we have our satellite, the Westminster West School, which is grades one to four with 14 students.

VBM: This school district has run up against one of the issues that smaller schools around the state are facing - declining enrollment and whether to keep smaller schools like Westminster West and Athens open, or combine them with another school. The Westminster West School has been on the block a few times, Athens closed its school. Do you see those as good things, more efficient, or negative education-wise?

Clark: It depends entirely upon where you are sitting in the situation. Athens and Grafton felt that they could come closer to a critical mass if they combined the two schools. If you're sitting in Athens, where you have very, very small numbers, you probably feel that you can offer more if you combine with Grafton. If you're sitting in Westminster, which has, shall we say, a history of factionalism - which by that I mean you've always had the Westminster West School and the Center School. When I was in my second term, the department of education was offering grants to reinvent the schools for very high performance. The Westminster Center School secured a \$10,000 grant, the largest the state gave for that purpose, and we Balkanized the Westminster Center School. We divided it into sub groupings. We had what we called the Upper School, grades five and six, and we had the Primary Program which operated off the Kurn Hattin campus, and then we had two additional wings, so we fractionalized the school into four semi-autonomous units. The long and the short of it was that it created a competition for the economic resources and that was not a tremendously successful model. But, you didn't know that until you tried it out.

VBM: So was that model dropped?

Clark: To the best of my understanding now you have essentially the Westminster Center School and you have Westminster West, with its declining enrollment. But enrollment is also declining in the Center School, Bob.

VBM: Isn't that pretty much true across the state? How does enrollment compare now to what you saw in 1988 when you first started serving?

Clark: When I was on the Westminster Town School Board, roughly in 1992 or 93, we had a peak enrollment of 385 students. I believe the current enrollment is about 200 kids. I think in general that there has been an overall decline in enrollment everywhere, without necessarily seeing a commensurate decline in taxes.

VBM: So the budgets aren't down by

half even though you may be educating half as many students as they were 20 years ago?

Clark: The budgets have not gone down, and it's my opinion, Bob, that the pressure on budgets was created by Act 68. What happened with Act 68, it didn't take long for school districts to figure out how to gain the system. In WNESU (Windham Northeast Supervisory Union), about three-quarters of the taxpayers, if I recall correctly, were income sensitive. What that meant, in a manner of speaking, was that school budgets could increase at a rate faster than the rate of taxation. And they did. So the net results was that we end up begging schools like Jamaica and Wilmington in order to support more and more and more down here in WNESU.

In fact, in 2005 I was returned to my school board seat by 14 votes but was also elected to the Westminster Select Board by about a three to two margin over the incumbent, Bill Noyes, who was also the chair. I made it abundantly clear to the union high school board that I would use my bully pulpit as a Westminster selectman to put pressure on the union high school budget to try to effect some control over it.

In fiscal year 2007 the budget was \$7,285,094. When the fiscal year 2008 budget was proposed, the number was about \$7.4 million. It was up about \$150,000, give or take. The budget was not supported by the union high school board. The budget proposal failed. I remember it very distinctly because everyone was sitting around a table looking at everyone else. I raised my hand and said, "I move \$7,285,000." Paul Obuchowski was the budget chair, and he said, "That's a cut." I said, "No, Paul, your proposed budget is an increase." He said, "No, that's a cut, it's less money than the budget we've been operating in." I said, "Paul, I'll make up the difference." The next day I went down to the supervisory union and wrote them out a check for \$94.

Since that time, the union high school budget has increased less than 2 percent cumulatively.

As a union high school we've been very fortunate in that we've gained control over our budget early, and have managed to maintain that control. The silver bullet, if you will, for the union high school, has been controlling the special education expenses. The state walked into the district several years ago with the proverbial cast of thousands - most of the heavy hitters from the upper echelon of the Department of Education came down and read the district the riot act. We were so far out of line as far as the state averages were with our special education population.

VBM: In the late 1990s I did a series of articles on this for the *Rutland Herald*, and at the time, special ed was a huge factor in budget increases.

Clark: What happened was, they eventually issued an ultimatum, which was that if this district did not begin to control special education expenses, the Department of Education very well might not reimburse the excess cost. We began to control expenses, and essentially up to the current cycle here, we've been able to take \$100,000 or better out of the special ed side of the budget and redirect it into regular education.

VBM: How did you get control of the special ed budget? Just one student with extraordinary needs can easily drive the special ed budget up over \$100,000 a year.

Clark: First, we took a look to see where our student codings were. Of course, we had essentially codings in two areas, the EDs, the Emotionally Disabled, and the LDs, the Learning Disabled. The LD population came down, I believe, because we finally moved away from the whole language model, which created tremendous deficits for kids who were not able to learn to read via whole language.

I have four kids. My daughter is a sharp cookie and she got it. The next two in line ended up coded. The third one, his mother kept him home mornings and worked on phonics with him. Finally the district moved away from whole language and back to phonics. That bulge was the LD bulge that worked its way up through the high school and on out. The ED bulge I think, quite frankly, was that we were not willing or able to deal with our ED population in-house, and we've turned that around. It's only about five years since the union high school had approximately 42 out-of-district placements. Some of them of course would have been LD, but the vast majority of them were ED that were farmed out to Kindle Farm School.

VBM: And that approach can be very expensive.

Clark: It's real expensive. Kindle Farm was riding high on the wave with that - they opened up a satellite campus out in Saxtons River in order to more efficiently capture those funds.

VBM: That has turned around somewhat?

Clark: It's turned around to a large degree. At this point in time I doubt if we have 10 kids who are placed out-of-district.

VBM: So that's down 75 percent or more.

Clark: Probably, from those peak years.

VBM: One of the things that Commissioner of Education Armando Vilasca wants to do is decrease the number of school districts. We have a huge number of supervisory unions, and are

paying large salaries to a lot of superintendents, for a very small state with a small population. There is a county in Florida with more students than the entire state of Vermont, and they have one supervisory union and one superintendent, where we have over 70. Do you see ways that the number of school districts can be decreased, especially as student enrollment shrinks?

Clark: My view of that is that there are districts that want to combine. Whitingham and Wilmington are discussing it because their expenses have gone up. In this district, by and large the taxpayers and voters are happy with us and there is not a great deal of external pressure to do it. I personally think that what is going to be more important is the degree to which there is what I would refer to as inter-district cooperation. There are some things that I think would make a great deal of sense. There are some services that you could combine across districts in much the same way that we combine across districts for our vocational education programs.

VBM: So you could combine things like purchasing supplies, transportation...

Clark: Right. Purchasing and transportation are obvious ones. I have little doubt that some of the more specialized services we could cooperate across districts on. Speech language pathologists are always in short supply. When you have one you sometimes don't need as much of one as you've got, where you might have another district that has needs. I'll give you a perfect example. BFUHS has excess teaching capacity, and what we've done with that is we're essentially loaning those teachers to the middle school, which is currently experiencing a population bulge. They need a couple of half time teachers here and there, but it's hard to hire quarter and half time people. So BFUHS is essentially leasing its excess teaching capacity to Bellows Falls Middle School.

VBM: You've mentioned that, on a vocation level, there is already a good deal of inter-district cooperation. WNESU works with both the Brattleboro and Springfield school districts, correct?

Clark: That's correct. What you have is that BFUHS sends students to two different technical districts. We send to the Windham Career Education Center in Brattleboro where we have a seat on the advisory board. And the majority of our kids go up to the River Valley Technical Center in Springfield. RUTC is one of three independent tech center districts in the state. Each of the sending high schools, which is Springfield, Bellows Falls, Green Mountain (Chester) and Black River (Ludlow), and Fall Mountain in New Hampshire. All those schools have representation on that board. That board creates a budget and oversees the operation of that school and goes directly to the voters at

the end of February asking for money. It's voted on at Town Meeting. That's a good example of how you can cooperate across districts.

VBM: That's what the Commissioner was talking about. If one district can't use a full time speech pathologist, perhaps two districts could share one. It's a way money could be more wisely spent. That's what you see happening?

Clark: It's the sort of thing that is starting to happen, at least with the union high school. BFUHS is trying hard to forge closer ties with the Rockingham School Board because we see the fate of the taxpayer and the fate of the kids being essentially dependent upon each other. In the past, BFUHS

said, "Oh, who's here? Let's get going." Now we're paying a lot more attention to who is coming in.

VBM: If you catch problems early in a student's education, it's much easier to resolve them than it is trying to deal with learning issues in high school. That just makes sense.

Clark: The purpose of a supervisory union as it's envisioned here in the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, is to have continuity of curriculum from kindergarten through 12th grade. It's a fairly new concept in this district, the notion that we should all be pulling in the same direction on that, but we're getting better at it.

VBM: Is it correct to assume that the high school population is also down?

Clark: The high school population has been in decline. We have a fairly large junior class compared to the last couple of years, but it's not a large class per se. The population of the school I believe is still under 400 total, and that includes out-of-district placements.

VBM: That's down considerably. I graduated in 1970 from Bellows Falls, and my class was very small with just under 100 students. But those were the Baby Boomer years. I also wanted to ask you about standardized testing. What issues has it created, pro and con?

Clark: Standardized testing gives you a snapshot of how you compare on standardized testing at other schools. I think that's a useful benchmark. I argued at one point in time, when BFUHS created a graduation policy that said "students will demonstrate mastery of state standards in order to graduate." I raised the question of what constituted mastery of state standards. As near as I could tell the only criteria at the time was what were known as the New Standard Reference Exams. If we had used those to demonstrate mastery, we probably would have only graduated 40 percent of our seniors.

I saw that as an opportunity to push for what I would refer to as localized assessment. I think that you need to have localized assessment as a form of check and balance over standardized testing, because to succeed on a standardized test, your curriculum has to cover the same area that the test does. That's fine if your kids have had that curriculum, but if they haven't had it, then they are not going to do well on it. A standardized test will indicate that, but it won't tell you the reasons why they didn't do well. If you have your own local assessment, that is a useful tool to either verify the results of standardized testing or help you to determine why it wasn't very accurate.

I'm in favor of standardized testing, but also of local assessment to verify the results.

VBM: The complaint is that teachers will just teach toward getting good results on the test.

Clark: We're making a conscious effort to do that at BFUHS. In the fall we prep for the NECAP exam. We have a so-called School and Community Relations Committee which meets off campus in Saxtons River the first Saturday of the month. It's our defacto PTA because we don't have one. Nobody wants to do it. One of the efforts we make is to try to create a conducive atmosphere for test cramming through food.

VBM: Is it working?

Clark: It worked pretty well with the Class of 2011, but it appears that it will have worked less well with the Class of 2012.

VBM: If you could change anything right now in the educational system, what would you change? What would you like to see different?

Clark: What would I like to see different? I would like to see fewer strings on what I would refer to as grant money. I think schools should have far more discretion about how they apply it, because I think that the boots on the ground generally have a far better idea of what the needs are than the suits in Montpelier and in Washington.

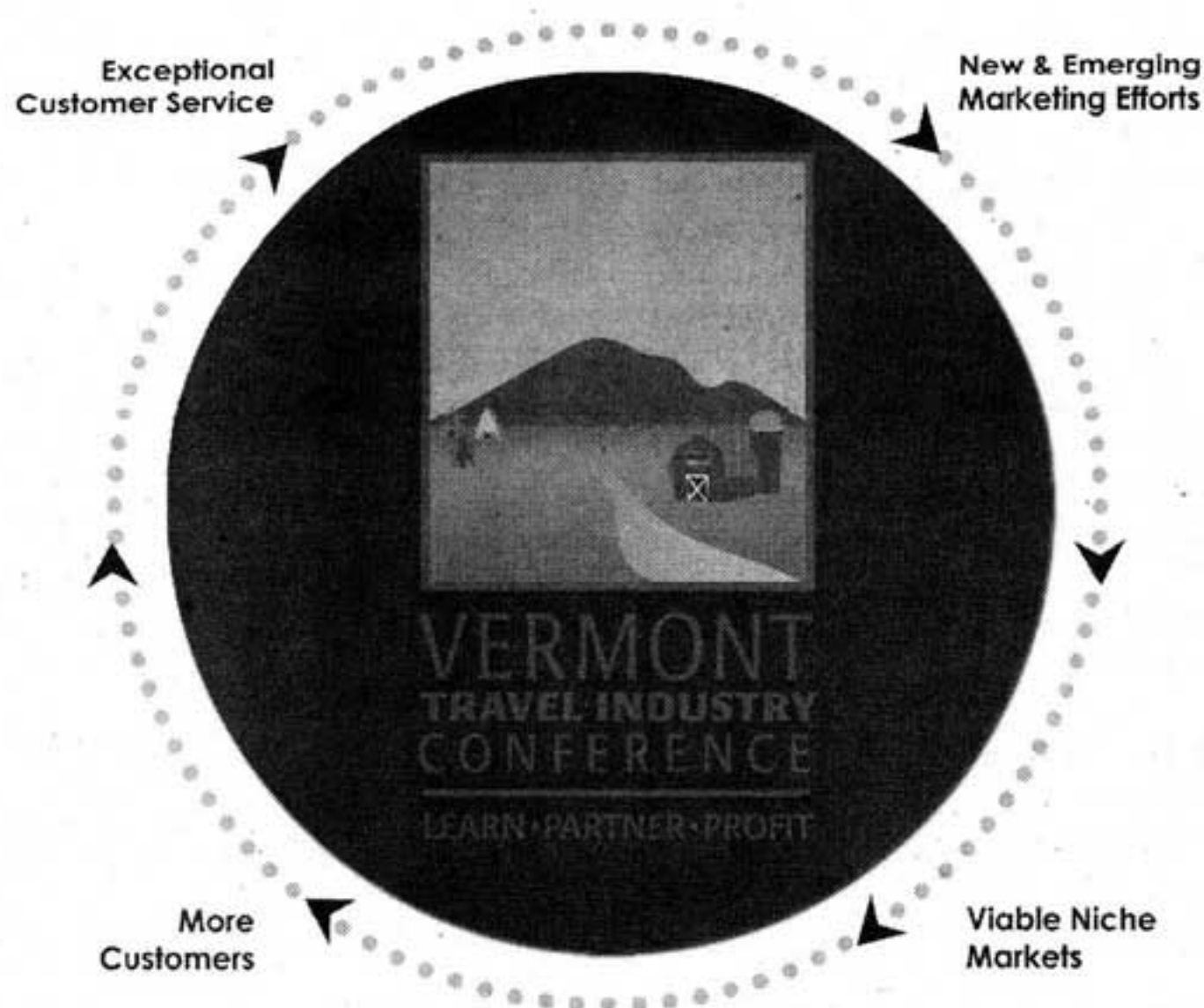
VBM: In most grants, it's pretty

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clearly laid out exactly how that money is supposed to be used.

Clark: Correct. What the current formula doesn't do, it doesn't encourage risk taking and educational innovation. We didn't know that it wasn't a good idea to fractionalize the Westminster Center School until we did it. We tried it. It didn't work and now we know it doesn't work. If you handed the school the same amount of money today, they would be more likely to do something with it that did work, but the failure to use grant funds to encourage innovation in education is short sighted.

VBM: Because you'll not only find out what fails, you'll also find out what works.

Clark: That's right.

VBM: Unions are a big issue in the country right now, and teacher unions are among the strongest. As a school board member, how do you view teacher unions?

Clark: Unions are a good thing, because unions in general tend to increase the overall standard of living, in this school director's opinion. I think that, in the foreseeable future, the days of the automatic 2.5 percent or 3.5 percent pay increases are over and done with. I think that even the unions realize that the taxpayer at this point in time is no longer able to support that sort of largesse. I think there is going to be a tremendous amount of heat and not much light generated in the current round of teacher contract negotiations. It's no secret South Burlington nearly took a strike over it, and I think they did pony up some new money in order to settle that. That's going to prove to be the exception in Vermont, I think, and not the norm.

VBM: Do you think unions protect bad teachers?

Clark: Unions can protect bad teachers, Bob, but you have to remember that they can protect good teachers as well. We had a situation when we negotiated our last contract when the union was supporting a teacher who had violated the school's drug and alcohol policy.

That would be an example of a union supporting a so-called "bad teacher," although the teacher in question was an outstanding teacher in the school. In that regard I'm glad that the union stepped up to the plate to support her. However, unions also support teachers who do stick their necks out a little bit, and I think that's a good thing. I hope we continue to negotiate contracts with teachers and I am a believer in the collective bargaining process.

VBM: Have we left anything out that should be included in this discussion?

Clark: I think the point that I would make is that, to a large degree, progress in education is a perceptual thing. For many, many years, BFUHS had an undeservedly poor reputation. One of the things that I am trying very hard to do as the chair is to change that perception. Standardized test scores apart, this school does a tremendous job of working with each and every kid who comes through the door.

If you want to send your kid to an Ivy League college, if you are in South-eastern Vermont, BFUHS is where you want to be because of the fact that we have Advanced Placement college level course offerings that no one else on this side of the state is matching. That's huge if you're someone looking to relocate into the area and you want to give your kid as much of an advantage with a public education as you can possibly gain.

I don't think that BFUHS is the only school in the state trying to do that, but I would like to see it become on the standardized test level the best public high school in Vermont within the next five years. Subjectively, I would like it to be the best public high school in Vermont because it will reach out and meet all its students' needs and not just the high performer and the low performer.

Robert Smith is a writer and photographer living in Westminster, VT. He is the editor of The Message for the Week, a weekly newspaper published out of Chester, VT. He can be reached at robfs52@yahoo.com.

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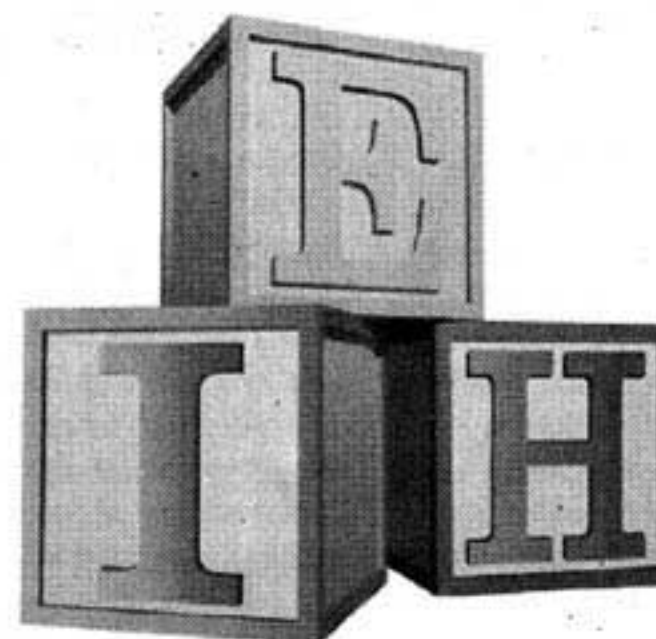


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