

February 10, 2018

Dear Members of the Warwick School Committee,

Simply defined, leadership is the ability to bring people together to achieve a common goal. A good leader encourages and inspires others through his or her actions. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, individuals must satisfy lower level needs before moving on to higher level needs. All educators learn Abraham Maslow's hierarchy in year one of undergraduate coursework. Understanding of these needs is essential if we are to develop the minds of young children and instill in these children a passion for and love of learning.

What does this have to do with Principal John Gannon at Norwood School? We recently learned that he is not being offered a contract for the upcoming school year. If the school committee approves his dismissal he will no longer be assigned to our building or any other in Warwick Public Schools. Why? Other than the district moving in a new direction and needing to make some difficult decisions, administration seems to be questioning Mr. Gannon's educational leadership skills.

According to Maslow, the first level of needs are the physiological ones of food, water, clothing, shelter, and rest. Forty-five percent of our students receive free or reduced lunch. We are also part of a federally funded program which delivers fruit or vegetable snacks, for every student, two days each week. These needs are obvious and not easily ignored. Therefore, they can be met through district, state, and federal initiatives. More importantly, at the school level, is Maslow's second level.

The second level of basic needs is safety and security. During the last two years, we have had four families suffer the loss of a parent/primary caregiver. Additionally, several children have transitioned to and from outside placements. These are major life events that impact a child's social and emotional development. In that same time period, we suffered another loss as a school community. That loss was the removal of the professionals who fulfilled the roles of guidance counselor and school psychologist. Despite multiple requests to fill these positions, we went an entire year without this basic building level support. Who do you suppose took on those roles? It was our principal, John Gannon. A good leader recognizes the

needs of those he or she leads, and if the need cannot be met by other means, the leader assumes the role of meeting this need. Mr. Gannon has met these needs and more. Without his willingness to assume those roles, we are certain that our children would have become even more at-risk.

Additionally, last winter we weathered a very difficult situation when our fire alarm system failed, which we've already brought to your attention. More recently, a heating unit motor in a classroom broke down. As the building was largely unoccupied and no smoke alarm activated, the heater ran for an hour filling the room and halls with noxious-smelling smoke before anyone noticed it. As the students began to enter the building, we awaited a directive from upper administration, which was rather slow to come. With concern for the safety and well-being of the children mounting, Mr. Gannon determined that someone needed to call the fire department and then arranged for the safe and orderly evacuation of the students, faculty, and staff. He then returned to the building to oversee the fire department clearing the building. Principal Gannon ensured that he had direct, accurate information before he brought everyone safely back to the school. Once the situation was understood and under control, he communicated what had transpired to Norwood families and reassured the Norwood community that their children were safe. As the leader of Norwood School, Mr. Gannon understood his role of principal to be as a disseminator of information and as a facilitator of communications for faculty, staff, students, families, and administration. He balanced these roles seamlessly.

On a daily basis our principal is called upon to assist with matters related to children with intense behavioral needs, which are largely due to improper placements in co-taught classrooms. Last school year as our building's needs rose to crisis level, we recognized that these concerns changed the direction of our faculty meetings. Naturally our collective desire to ensure the well-being of our entire school community took precedence over a district driven agenda. While seeking to provide a safe and secure learning environment, Mr. Gannon prioritized and gently guided the school community as he recognized the need to fulfill Maslow's second basic level of needs. So that we could share with administration our concerns as a faculty, six (6) separate one-hour meetings were held before school. Although these meetings were voluntary, 100% of the faculty attended them. Up until that point, we felt that central administrators were not hearing or even ignoring our pleas for help. When our director, Ms. Dambruch, took on a leadership role, she was clear in her own understanding that students with

extreme behavioral challenges should not be placed in co-taught classrooms; rather, only those children with true learning disabilities should be. Despite being in agreement on this matter, Special Services continues this placement practice. These placements, without appropriate resources and teacher training, affect every student in the class and cause teachers to spend inordinate amounts of time addressing the behaviors of a single child over the needs of the group. Often disruptions affect the work of other classes. In addition, the lack of appropriate staffing and appropriate space create an unacceptable situation, particularly when we have a safety room that is hardly safe, despite repeated requests (dating back to February of 2017) to have the room fitted with appropriate matting and means of egress. A proper safety room and an appropriately equipped sensory room are absent at Norwood. A sensory room is a therapeutic space containing a variety of equipment that provides students with personalized sensory input and helps them calm and focus themselves so they can be better prepared for learning and interacting with others. We are a school that currently has three grade levels of co-taught classrooms, all containing students who require such a space. Because Mr. Gannon witnesses and understands the conditions which exist at Norwood, he has again been compelled to prioritize and place the needs of the children first. There's no doubt that his leadership and decision making at the building level has served not only to meet the needs of our school community, but also to fill a role and address issues that central administrators should be filling and addressing.

The third level of Maslow's needs addresses the psychological needs of building trusting relationships. There are several children who have developed strong bonds with Mr. Gannon and look to him for a warm smile or encouraging words when their day gets overwhelming. Occasionally, when a situation warrants, Principal Gannon has accompanied children home on the bus. He has also visited the homes of chronically absent children and promoted their sense of value within the school community. Through his kind and gentle manner, he has developed a level of trust with students who have difficulty trusting anyone. Furthermore, he has earned the trust and confidence of the parents in this community and of his faculty and staff, many of whom are losing faith in and have had difficulty collaborating with central administration for a multitude of reasons including ineffective communication. Mr. Gannon bridges a gap created as a result of these obstacles.

These are only three of the five levels in Maslow's hierarchy. Hopefully it is clear that safety and security is an ongoing basic concern at Norwood. Without resolution, moving up to the final levels of need which develop confidence and achievement is a challenge—for students and adults alike. John Gannon makes decisions on a daily basis in these areas for the needs of our students, and, yes, some of them have been difficult, but he has been committed to and supportive of every student, staff, and faculty member. Mr. Gannon's door is always open, no matter what is on his agenda for the day. At present it seems that he is being penalized for putting children first, advocating for the needs of his school, and embodying the traits of an effective leader. No one should be placed at a disadvantage for believing in the potential of every child and doing what's right for all children.

How can anyone judge the quality of a leader when an unresponsive administration ties his hands? John Gannon has internalized Maslow's hierarchy of needs and confidently meets these demands daily. We are a group of veteran professionals who are putting our names and reputations behind Mr. Gannon. We do not do so lightly. The faculty and staff are united with the parents of Norwood in our support of Principal John Gannon. We respectfully ask you to carefully reconsider the administration's recommendation for the non-renewal of Principal Gannon's contract.

Respectfully,

The Faculty and Staff of Norwood School

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