

31 Cider Hill Lane
Sherborn, MA 01770

March 11, 2015

In my position as member and Chair of the Town of Sherborn Advisory (Finance) Committee, I have known Steven Bliss for three years, first as Assistant Superintendent of the Dover-Sherborn schools, and then, for the past two years as Superintendent. It is a pleasure to write this letter on his behalf.

Steve is extremely knowledgeable, and possesses strong leadership, organizational, and communication skills; he excels at budget development and oversight. His management style fosters collegiality and encourages new ideas; at the same time, he is focused and decisive.

Extensive knowledge

Steve is extremely knowledgeable and his strong intellect guides that knowledge to provide exceptional leadership. Not only has he an encyclopedic grasp of the overall programs and the minutiae of each of the four schools within the Dover-Sherborn system (which one would expect of any qualified Superintendent); but he also can refer with ease to the often arcane and complex state laws and regulations and local statutes that govern both the day-to-day and long term functioning of the system. Steve's deep reservoir of knowledge enables him to offer creative solutions to complicated problems; in particular, it enables him to streamline and combine the many "moving parts" of a four-school system in ways that are both educationally and financially sound.

In his first year as Superintendent, Steve re-organized the administration of the system's Special Education program in a manner that expanded general oversight, closely aligned the programs in the four schools with one another, and provided enhanced educational opportunities for the associated student cohort—all with no increase in overall cost. In his second year, Steve developed several other streamlining innovations that will serve the system well as it moves forward in the face of: declining government aid, a shrinking population, and a reliance for primary funding on communities working within the constraints of Massachusetts' Proposition 2 ½ and no commercial tax base.

A Regional Superintendent not only must know the curricula in multiple schools, he also must "know" the buildings and grounds where those curricula are offered. Here again, Steve has an excellent understanding of everything from the payback of LED lighting, to the benefits of various drainage options to avoid flooding, to just how long we can wait for new divider curtains for the gym. He understands that the school properties are major town assets, and he prioritizes preserving their value.

Leadership

Steve is a gifted leader of the best kind—one who leads by example. In his first year as Superintendent, Steve brought in an almost entirely new administrative team and integrated them in a way that resulted in their having the full support of faculty. Combining these new hires with continuing high-level personnel, he formed an Administrative Cabinet that has made a positive contribution to the system in terms of innovation and collaboration. Year one of Steve's Superintendency also coincided with the first year of a new teacher evaluation process. The faculty has embraced this evaluation tool and has even subscribed to a professional development course through which they can become peer evaluators of their colleagues.

Steve is a unifying force even among groups with some naturally conflicting priorities. He is constantly juggling the demands of three school committees, two finance committees, two Boards of Selectmen, four parent groups, four faculties, and, not least of course, over 2,000 students. He does this with aplomb—and somehow manages to convince each group that their priorities are especially important and well worth considering. Kind of amazing! A very few people are simply “natural born leaders”; I am convinced that Steve is one of these individuals, and that the leadership skills he has demonstrated as Superintendent will transfer seamlessly to whatever his next venture may be.

Organizational and communication skills

Steve is among the most organized individuals I have met, with an outstanding ability to keep many “processes” running in the background while focusing intently on the task at hand. As mentioned previously, acting as the coordinator of four schools in two towns requires the ability to both synthesize those things that relate to all four buildings, and at the same time differentiate and pay closest attention to those that are vital and specific to the single situation currently “on the front burner.” Although Steve makes this look easy, of course it is not; it is a major accomplishment.

He arrives early for every meeting, and is totally prepared. I have never seen Steve at a loss, no matter how unexpected the question; it is clear that he always takes great care in organizing both his thoughts and his presentations. He runs what I would describe as a *crisp* meeting; he invites and allows all relevant comments and discussion, but is quick to move on if the conversation begins to devolve. He ensures that discussions stay on track and that the meeting proceeds on schedule. As well, he sees the big picture and distills from it an organized approach to the best path forward. And once he has determined what he feels is the best course of action, Steve is especially skilled at communicating to others both his goals and the means to achieve them. He is extremely effective at getting the message out to all concerned in the clearest way possible.

Budget development and oversight

Although this topic comes late in this letter, it is of tremendous importance to me, both as Chair of my town’s finance committee and as a taxpayer. The local and regional schools together comprise approximately ~65% of our town’s ~\$25,000,000 operating budget, and capital expenses for school infrastructure typically run between \$250,000 - \$500,000 each year. Because the town’s budget is funded almost entirely through local property taxes, it is imperative that the schools run as lean as possible while still providing the superior educational experience for which our town is often cited.

Steve has provided the town two consecutive budgets that demonstrate (in his words) “the administration’s appreciation for the fact that our member towns almost entirely fund our first-class school system via local individual property taxes where both the base (value of real estate) and the multiplier (tax rate applied to the base) are legally constrained in terms of growth.” These budgets have been clear and exceptionally well annotated, with revisions clearly noted and explained. They were built with significant collaboration between the Superintendent’s office and the building-based administrators. Many line items that had been increasing each year have been level-funded at the rate budgeted in FY13. Some items have been submitted at lower cost than in previous years, as Steve determined that the higher dollars were not justified. In some cases, increases in one area were balanced by specific decreases elsewhere.

There will always be some conflict and tension between a town’s budget makers, who want to spend the money, and the finance committee that recommends the budgets to the town—who want to save as much as possible. But within that context, I can truly say that Steve builds an

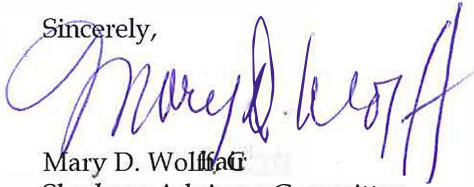
honest budget based on what he and his team have discerned to be the best interests of the towns and students they serve.

A final note

I would be remiss if I did not conclude by saying that working with Steve has been one of the highlights of my four-year tenure on Sherborn Advisory. His sunny disposition and unflagging good cheer have brightened many of my days. I have had careers as an English teacher/Department Chair and as a technical writer/manager. As a teacher, I would love to have worked for Steve. I believe he absolutely brings out the best in people—growing *with* those who bring equal expertise and experience to the table, and mentoring those needing some support. As a writer, I admire Steve's impeccable language skills—formal or informal, lengthy presentation or quick e-mail—always well crafted and correctly expressed. As a manager, I value his work ethic and his willingness always to go the extra mile to get the job done.

Finally... In the three years I have known Steve, I don't think I have ever seen him without a tie. In our very casual world, it's a small thing, and noticing it is perhaps a bit old-fashioned on my part; but I think in many ways it captures Steve's essence: wearing a tie shows respect for his position, respect for himself, and respect for those with whom he interacts. Our school system will be the less when Steve moves on; but I am happy to support his next step in what I know will be a successful future.

Sincerely,



Mary D. Wolff
Sherborn Advisory Committee

