

For Immediate Release

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School and Community Work Together to Resolve Concerns

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***The Whitefield Collaborative Problem Solving Project*** aims to create a cohesive group to improve school environment for students

A new effort is underway in Whitefield to help bridge the gap and ease tensions between the community, school employees, school leadership and the school board. The ***Whitefield Collaborative Problem Solving Project*** is made up of 23 members who have agreed to a new approach to deal with community issues raised over the past few months at various town meetings and events.

Among the concerns raised by approximately 80 people at a school forum this fall: bullying, perceptions of an unsafe school environment and lack of accountability for students and staff, lack of consistency when dealing with academics and behavior, and a lack of connection to the overall Whitefield community.

The purpose of the fall forum was to have an open dialog between the school leadership, community members, parents and school personnel. The goal of the forum was to set clear priorities for the school's future and to develop a plan to achieve the goals.

Joan Morin, Whitefield resident and former school board member offered her expertise in conflict management, in hopes of bringing the groups together. "I was very concerned that the differing factions in town were beginning to draw lines in the sand, where no one was going to come out unscathed. Individuals had determined what the solutions should be without full consideration of everyone's position and interest," Morin explained.

Morin, who is a Labor Advocate with the Maine Education Association, has been promoting and encouraging districts across the state to use a proven collaborative process, when dealing with matters of conflict and disagreement.

The Whitefield community, with Ms. Morin's assistance and facilitation, has put together the **Whitefield Collaborative Problem Solving Project**. Collaborative problem solving is a process conducted in a principled way that creates effective solutions while improving relationships and understanding.

Twenty-three project members have volunteered to be part of the project; 3 RSU 12 Administrators (Superintendent, SPED Director, Whitefield Interim Principal), the 3 Whitefield School Board members, 4 Whitefield community members, 5 Whitefield parents, 3 Whitefield parents whose children do not attend Whitefield School and 5 Whitefield School staff members.

"The collaborative problem-solving approach is an exciting, innovative way of bringing groups of stakeholders together to solve problems. It has proven to be successful in a variety of situations. We are confident that this approach will work for the Whitefield School Community. As champions of change, we are committed to embracing and implementing long-term change that will truly benefit our students," explained RSU 12 Superintendent, Howard Tuttle.

The collaborative process requires participants to be trained and to develop and agree to *Problem Solving Guidelines and Standards* prior to beginning the problem-solving process. All project participants have been trained in the process.

The process involves the participants to, identify issues, list their interest of the identified issue, brainstorm options for potential resolution and reach consensus on the desired option.

The first issue identified and agreed to was; *How, when, what and to whom do we communicate the work and progress of the project?*

The project members reached the following consensus on communication:

***Project participants will hold a public meeting to provide a progress report to all constituents. This shall be done once the project members have reached consensus on a few of the identified issues. The newsprint document, minutes summary, guidelines and standards document and the list of project participants will be posted to the district's website.***

***After each project meeting the newsprint document and the minutes summary will be posted to the district's website. Quarterly project reports will be provided to the newspapers, town and district newsletters and the Wildcat Weekly. Newsletters will include a link to district postings.***

Ben Marcus, owner of the *Sheepscot General Store and Farm*, who volunteered to be a member of the Project says he joined the project because, "The store is a hub in the community where I have the pleasure of talking to many people and the well-being of the Whitefield school is an important topic to me. I have been hearing about the school from students, parents, teachers and community members; I pick anybody and everybody's brain who is willing to have the discussion, including many people who have chosen to send their kids to other schools for varying reasons. There is a negative perception about the Whitefield school. I'm there first to understand the scope of the issues and then I am there as an active participant to help to figure out solutions and help with accountability. "

By working through this collaborative problem-solving approach, problems are seen as belonging to everyone; with hopes that ultimately, solutions will benefit all...our students, staff, and community.

