

A Vermont principal's record and what happened next

By Timothy O'Neil

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This country has a teacher shortage. This is not a secret. Legislators discuss it, superintendents cite it at budget hearings, and communities across the region watch qualified educators leave the profession while fewer young people choose to enter it. Everyone agrees it is a problem. What no one wants to talk about is how we are making it worse.

My wife, Susannah O'Neil, is exactly the kind of teacher this country cannot afford to lose. She holds advanced credentials in science education, has spent her career building innovative, hands-on curriculum that reaches students who struggle in traditional settings, and has received strong performance evaluations throughout her tenure at Hinsdale Middle/High School. Her most recent formative assessment, completed by the assistant principal in January 2026, described her instruction as highly engaging, her planning as thoughtful and standards-aligned, and her classroom environment as efficient and student-centered.

Her contract will not be renewed at the end of this school year.

Mine will not be renewed either. I am a business teacher at the same school, with the same strong record and the same outcome. Both of our non-renewals were delivered while a formal union grievance, filed in August 2025, remains actively unresolved. Neither non-renewal has been accompanied by a documented performance rationale. We have simply been shown the door.

This is the teacher shortage in action. Not the abstract version that gets discussed in state capitals, but the specific, local, human version: a district removing two qualified, positively reviewed teachers mid-grievance, with no accountability and apparently no concern for the message it sends to anyone considering a career in this profession.

The decision to non-renew us did not happen in a vacuum. It followed more than a year of what our grievance documents as a consistent pattern: last-minute teaching assignment changes made without the contractually required consultation, verbal commitments from district leadership that were later retracted without explanation, and a workplace environment that our grievance describes as hostile and destabilizing. Susannah has a diagnosed anxiety disorder, disclosed to administration on multiple occasions. The repeated pattern of surprise changes and broken promises resulted, on at least one documented occasion, in a 48-hour panic attack in the days before school began.

The principal at the center of this grievance is Anna Roth. Before she was hired at Hinsdale, there were red flags that a thorough vetting process should have surfaced. Ms. Roth previously served as principal at Twin Valley Middle High School in Whitingham, Vermont. While there, she was the subject of a formal complaint filed by the ACLU of Vermont on behalf of a Black student who experienced repeated and escalating racial harassment. The complaint alleged that Ms. Roth failed to take meaningful action despite multiple reports, and that she told the student's mother that the Nazi salute being directed at her daughter was simply something the kids did there. That matter was eventually resolved through separate settlements with both the U.S. Department of Justice and the ACLU of Vermont.

In February 2026, students at Hinsdale staged a walkout specifically citing Ms. Roth's mishandling of a current racial harassment complaint and her prior record at Twin Valley. The district's own superintendent acknowledged publicly that the school had failed at preventing harm. The student's mother withdrew her daughter from the school entirely.

These were not unforeseeable outcomes. They were foreseeable from the moment a principal with that prior record was handed the keys to another school. Who conducted the background check? Who made the hire? And who is asking those questions now?

Not our union, apparently.

We are members of the Hinsdale Federation of Teachers, represented by NEA-NH. When we filed our grievance last fall, we believed the union would be a genuine ally. That belief has not survived contact with reality. Our UniServ Director informed me in writing that her representation cannot be at my direction. She further stated that I would need to let her be in charge of strategy, tactics, communications, and procedural aspects of the grievance as a condition of continued representation.

I want to be precise about what that means in practice. It means that while the district non-renews two teachers with clean records mid-grievance, the union's position is that I must cede control of my own case or risk losing their support. It means that my ability to engage outside counsel, speak publicly about matters of public concern, or make strategic decisions in coordination with an attorney must be subordinated to the union's institutional preferences. It means that an organization I have paid dues to is telling me that my cooperation is required, while offering a definition of cooperation that would leave most lawyers speechless.

I understand why unions work this way. They have ongoing relationships with the same district administrators they are supposed to hold accountable on our behalf. They have other members in the same buildings. They have institutional interests that do not always align with the interests of individual members fighting non-renewal. I do not assign personal bad faith to our UniServ Director. I am describing a structural problem that anyone in our position would recognize immediately.

What I will say is this: if the NEA's answer to a documented retaliatory non-renewal, a principal with a civil rights settlement on her record, and a superintendent who has already faced a community no-confidence petition is to tell the affected teachers to sit down and let the union drive, then the NEA is

not solving the teacher shortage problem. It is contributing to it.

Teachers are watching. The ones still in classrooms, the ones considering leaving, and the young people deciding whether this profession is worth entering are all watching how districts and unions treat educators when things get difficult. What they are seeing in Hinsdale is not encouraging.

We are not asking for anything extraordinary. We are asking for fairness, for honest process, and for the basic protection that union membership is supposed to provide. The students who have told us they plan to come to the school board meeting to show their support understand what is at stake. It would be good if the adults in charge of protecting teachers understood it too.

Editor's Note: The Reformer reached out to Superintendent of Schools David Ryan, School Board Chair April Anderson, and the Hinsdale Federation of Teachers regarding this commentary. The latter two did not respond and Ryan said in an email that he does not comment on personnel matters.

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