April 29, 2014

Vermont Humanities Council
11 Loomis Street
Montpelier, VT 05602

To the judging committee of the Victor R. Swenson Humanities Educator Award:

I write to you to nominate [redacted] for the Victor R. Swenson Humanities Educator Award. As the principal of the [redacted] School, I have known [redacted] for eleven of the twenty-five years that he has been teaching 5th-6th grade.

Imagine - school is out for the day and all is quiet as a lanky adolescent walks purposefully down the hall and up the stairs to [redacted]'s room. He's come to check in, fill [redacted] in on high school life, and reminisce about his 6th grade field research trip to New York City. [redacted]'s high expectations for his students, his wry sense of humor, and his passion for the material he teaches result in his being the teacher students remember long after they leave [redacted] School.

[redacted] brings a rich tapestry of interests and skills to his teaching. Before becoming a teacher he was in the school for four years as an artist in residence, sponsored by the Vermont Council for the Arts. Outside of school he is a furniture maker and craftsman, as well as a Justice of the Peace. He has the sensibility of an artist along with the patience and attention to detail required to produce beautiful pieces of furniture. In addition, his interest in a multitude of topics makes him a Renaissance man who reads and thinks widely. These qualities come together in his teaching and are evidenced in the creative and compelling curriculum he develops for his multiage 5th-6th grade class at [redacted] School.

[redacted] crafts a week of Field Research in New York City, which is the cornerstone of a year of study that includes a whole class focus on immigration to America and an independent study in which each student researches a topic of interest. As they learn about immigration the students research their own roots and create big maps of their countries of origin. Then they become immigrants as they participate in a simulation of the experience of coming through Ellis Island in the early 20th century. While in New York, they visit the Tenement Museum and Ellis Island. This is accompanied by a carefully chosen read aloud of the book *Lupita Manana*, the story of two Mexican children coming to the United States today. [redacted] brilliantly orchestrates activities as

he takes his students deep into the immigrant experience. They come to understand this essential human experience of leaving home and coming to a new country in a very personal way.

Believing that becoming an independent and lifelong learner is a goal of education, [redacted] has each student choose a topic for independent study to pursue before and during the trip and then present at a parent evening on their return. Whenever possible a student interviews someone in New York who is knowledgeable about his topic. [redacted] has lined up interviews with a member of the New York Stock Exchange, the director of Landscape Design for Central Park, a buyer at FAO Schwartz, the curator of dioramas at the Museum of Natural History and of the Egyptian wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a stage manager at the New York City Ballet, just to name a few. A student who is learning about the Brooklyn Bridge may walk across the bridge and politely ask other pedestrians what the bridge means to them. Arranging the interviews is a feat in itself. Preparing the students for the interview is key to it being a successful experience for both the student and the interviewee. [redacted] does this extraordinarily well. Questions are prepared carefully. The student practices using a recording device and taking notes in advance.

I've accompanied [redacted]'s class on the trip to New York City several times and each time I'm astounded by the extent of [redacted]'s knowledge of the city, his ability to share this with his students, his attention to detail as he plans every aspect of every day, and his unwavering commitment to each child's having an experience that stays with him all of his life.

The migrations of people and accompanying exchange and trade of materials and ideas is the year long focus for social studies. Starting with the Silk Road and moving on to Medieval Europe, the Age of Exploration, and, finally, United States Immigration History. As they study each period, students are also exposed to the culture of the times.

[redacted] believes that students need rich content to sink their teeth into. His search for the perfect book and the most engaging activity is relentless. Long before the Common Core, [redacted] understood that the literature he chose for his students needs to be complex and challenging and that, with the proper support, they would rise to the challenge. As part of the study of Medieval Europe, students memorize and recite the first stanza of *the Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. Not all students learn in the same way, so performing it as a rap is a way in for some. One estimate of the impact this has can be made when they recite at All School Sing. As I look at the audience, I see the 7th and 8th graders mouthing the words as they remember back to their own performance.

As a 6th grade teacher, [redacted] is responsible for teaching a wide range of subjects. This provides the platform for him to integrate content areas bringing together areas such as literature and drama and science and science fiction. This is considered

innovative and cutting edge at the high school level, but it only makes sense to a teacher like [redacted] who sees the big picture and distills its essence for his students.

What better visual arts form than shadow puppetry to portray the archetypal characters from Greek mythology? After immersing themselves in reading myths, [redacted]'s students work in teams to create original plays whose characters embody the essence of the gods, goddesses, and mortals but are often cast with a twist in a modern setting. When studying astronomy, what better way to appreciate the enormity of the universe than through reading science fiction such as Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* and imagining and creating a space colony capable of meeting the physical, social, and recreational needs of man?

The final example of extraordinary curriculum I'd like to share is [redacted]'s community history project, Work in Marlboro, which was supported by the Vermont and Marlboro Historical Societies. Over the course of several years [redacted]'s students have interviewed Marlborians who live and work in town. These interviews are archived digitally with the Marlboro Historical Society and create a rich record of this eclectic and colorful community. Interviewees have included the road foreman, artists, college professors, builders, bus drivers, and town officers. With his characteristic passion and thoroughness [redacted] set them up for success with careful preparation. They learned how to use the recording equipment and practiced the questions they would ask. Students know they are doing important work and making a contribution to our town's historical record.

The younger students are always a little intimidated about moving into [redacted]'s room as he has the well deserved reputation for requiring hard work and being an exacting task master. After a couple of months of learning the new routine for vocabulary and developing interpretive questions for short stories they settle in. At the end of two years, they move on with a sense of accomplishment and self confidence. Many of them will some day return to visit [redacted] and express their appreciation for all they learned with him.

I feel privileged to work closely with [redacted] and to witness the powerful learning that takes place in his classroom. I urge you to recognize [redacted] as an excellent candidate for the Victor R. Swenson Humanities Educator Award. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Principal