When the children at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps Lancaster School were asked “When you think about Val, the school principal, what comes to your mind,” this is what they said:

- Treats everyone kindly
- Knows a lot about us
- Easy to talk to
- Always listens to us and what we have to say
- Not rude

Valerie (Val) Paen has worked at RFK Children's Action Corps for 28 years, serving as principal at the Lancaster School, an approved special education school that works with children in grades 1 through 12, since 1992.

“For many of these children, education has been a thorn in their sides. When I can help children believe in themselves and achieve educationally — often for the first time — that is what it is all about for me,” Paen said. “(The work) is about getting to know the kids on an individual basis, finding what is special about them and letting them know you really care. It is about seeing the goodness in each one of them.”

In maintaining educational curriculum according to state frameworks, oversight and implementation of students’ Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) and overseeing professional development and supervision of a staff of 27 professionals, Paen fosters relationships with outside educational districts, local school district and community liaisons, maintains policies and procedures according to the Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education standards and serves as a Wachusett Chamber of Commerce member.

“School principal’ only scrapes the surface of describing Val’s work,” said Alan Klein, a senior vice president and COO for RFK. “She has made a career out of this work. Whether leading staff in our Leadership Institute, walking the school hallway and addressing each child by name or comforting a worried parent, Val brings compassion, a calming presence and creativity to everything she does.”

RFK is a leader in child welfare, juvenile justice, and advocacy in Massachusetts, and is currently licensed by and contracts with the state to provide child welfare, special education, adoption and juvenile justice services.