Sign of the Times
Lessons Learned from Closing a School
Q&A with U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan
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Minnesota School Boards Association
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Calendar

MAY 2009
14-15 MSBA Board of Directors’ Annual Meeting
20 Minnesota School District Liquid Asset Fund Plus Meeting
25 Memorial Day (no meetings)

JUNE 2009
11 MSBA Insurance Trust Meeting

JULY 2009
3 Independence Day Observed (no meetings)
4 Independence Day (no meetings)

AUGUST 2009
12 MSBA Board of Directors’ Meeting
12 Minnesota School District Liquid Asset Fund Plus Meeting
12 MSBA Insurance Trust Meeting
12 MSBA Phase I & II Combination
12 MSBA Summer Seminar Early Birds
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HIRING A BOARD-SAVVY SUPERINTENDENT
Doug Eadie

PASSING A REFERENDUM AGAINST ALL ODDS: ONE COMMUNITY’S COMEBACK STORY
Jennifer Healy

The MSBA Journal thanks the students of Elk River High School for sharing their art with us in this issue.
Quotes of Note captures some of the more interesting statements MSBA staff have read in local, state and national publications.

**Quotes of Note**

**Quotes**

**Trying to prepare a district budget with no firm Legislative funding**

“It’s like piloting an airplane in a dense cloud and all the instrumentation just went out.”

*St. Peter Superintendent Jeff Olson*

**Recruiting students from other districts**

“I’ve always felt public schools will get better if they are forced to compete. I’m willing to compete with any school in the region.”

*Grand Meadow Superintendent Joe Brown*

**Legislative mandates**

“In a legislative session where funding is going to be very tight, it might be an opportune time to remove some of these mandates. Instead, it looks like we will get more requirements within the limited funds available.”

*Rocori Superintendent Scott Staska*

**School funding**

“We’re given the minimum to survive. And we still have to produce the maximum.”

*Lester Prairie Schools Superintendent Greg East*

**Benefits of teacher mentoring**

“I had more help learning how to change and balance tires than I got for teaching when I first started.”

*St. Francis QComp District Coordinator Randy Keillor*

**Closing a school**

“This is the most difficult meeting I’ve ever been involved with. No one wants to have conversations about repurposing or closing a building.”

*Waterville-Elysian Superintendent Joel Whitehurst*
Tough schools may let their kids play on tar, but smart schools let their kids play on safe surfaces.

One of the goals for public schools is to have a safe learning environment for children. In an era where media reports of school shootings seem to be the main time you hear about school safety, you may want to know the real facts about student injuries—80 percent of those injuries happen outside of your school building, mostly on your playground.

In my day, a patch of grass or a strip of asphalt was our playground. Tough kids play on tar. We didn’t think much about how one fall and a hit to the head could severely injure a student. But we never compiled statistics on it, either.

Today, we try to get away from asphalt by using pea gravel or wood chips. It’s better than tar; but as I found out, not by much, unless districts maintain the surfaces every day and use a lot of pea gravel. For a simple playground with a fall height of only five feet, you would need nine inches of pea gravel.

Shannon Godwin, of the National Playground Compliance Group, had some shocking figures about dangers in playgrounds. In 2007, more than 244,000 students were injured on playgrounds, mainly kids aged 2 to 9 years old. As for pea gravel: “Probably the only time a pea gravel playground or wood chip playground is totally safe is the first day students play on it,” he said.

Part of the problem is that schools may be so intent on getting the best piece of playground equipment for the buck that they don’t think about spending money on what is the most important part of a playground—a safe surface. And that surface has to be maintained.

That’s where the Minnesota Safe Surfacing program comes in. These smooth rubber tiles can reduce injuries from falls by 75 percent. The biggest bonuses are that they are also approved for use by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and require little to no maintenance.

We’ve seen playground projects from Mankato to Kittson Central that use these tiles, and we were so impressed that we sponsored seminars so school districts can find out about them. We’re also working at the Legislature to get legislation through that will allow districts to use the health and safety levy money for playground improvements (SF 786).

At MSBA, we are also encouraging districts to get free playground compliance checks so building and grounds workers know what to look for. Godwin has hundreds of pictures from playgrounds all over Minnesota that show dangerous equipment and how lack of maintenance can cause dangerous surfaces.

Despite these tough budget times, a free compliance check can pay off in the long run when you need to order new playground equipment or put priorities on what should be done to ensure the safety of your students.

Tough schools may let their kids play on tar, but smart schools let their kids play on safe surfaces. For more information on how to reduce school injuries in your district, check out the information at www.playgroundcompliance.com.
With tight budget times, schools are still facing a mandate to publish minutes in a newspaper at costs that, from an MSBA survey of districts, go as high as $15,000 a year. Years ago, a mandate like that probably made sense. Newspapers could brag high readership, although I don’t know how many people scoured the Public Notice section to read school board or city council minutes.

But today is a different landscape for newspapers. Readership has fallen drastically—in part by a move of readers from a printed page to an online newspaper page. And the domino effect has already shown up in Minnesota as newspapers start shutting down (like the Minnesota Sun newspaper chain did with the Inver Grove Heights/South St. Paul edition in February) or going into bankruptcy (like the Star Tribune and a huge number of other papers across the country) or cutting back on publications (like the Waseca County News in March).

One of the largest papers in the country, the Detroit Free Press, will now only be delivered to people’s homes on Thursday and Friday. Cities with two newspapers, such as Madison, Wis., have made the afternoon daily an online-only edition. Other major cities—such as Denver and the Rocky Mountain News—have simply shut down one paper in the hopes that the other can survive.

Even newspaper insiders say most newspapers going through bankruptcy will have to come back with a model that offers less in print and more on the Web. The cold, hard facts are that newspapers in general are either going to fold or move their content to the Web. The Pioneer Press and Duluth News-Tribune recently received a state grant of $298,000 to retrain staff to move news to the Internet. News on the Internet looks to be the future of the newspaper industry.

Why should board members care? I’ll go back to the public notice issue. If newspapers are sliding toward the Web with declining readership of the print product, then why should school boards, city councils and county boards be required to publish meeting minutes in a print newspaper? Why not simply put the minutes on the school district Web site with a notice in the newspaper to direct readers to the school Web site?

What is the difference between a school district paying up to $15,000 to publish minutes in a print newspaper that is mostly read by people on the Web versus a school district paying little to nothing to post the minutes on their own school district Web site? More and more, it’s looking like the only difference is that school districts could save a big chunk of money better spent on educating children.

Lobbyists for newspapers are making a push to say that if minutes aren’t published in newspapers, people won’t know what is happening at the board table. But I’m a little confused on this one because the minutes can be read on a school district’s Web site, sometimes much more easily than the little print in the public notice section in the back of a newspaper. In fact, more people would probably read them on the school district site than in a newspaper. The meetings are also open. And a good share of districts broadcast the meetings on cable access. So the sky-is-falling argument from newspaper lobbyists doesn’t seem to hold much sway. It seems like a changing industry trying to keep its claws into money that should be spent educating kids.

So here’s my news that’s fit to print: It’s time to end the mandate that forces schools to spend thousands of dollars publishing minutes in newspapers. If newspapers are moving toward more online content, school board minutes should move to a district’s online site.
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All day, every day.

That’s the move that many school districts across the state are making for their kindergarten programs.

But the Browns Valley School District has already taken it a step further: All-day, everyday preschool.

“We felt that our children in the area were ready for the next step,” said Barb Goodhart, Browns Valley’s preschool teacher. “The (Browns Valley) School Wide Committee looked at what we could do.”

Goodhart and Jen Graff, Browns Valley’s kindergarten teacher, along with the school district’s School Wide Committee, were among the key players in taking that next step.

Graff was quick to single out Superintendent Brenda Reed: “There’s no way the program could be implemented without the support of our superintendent.”

Back story

Since 1998, two separate preschools coexisted in Browns Valley: the Head Start program...
(founded in the early 1970s), which served 3- and 4-year-olds four half days per week, and Browns Valley’s preschool (founded in January 1998), which served 4-year-olds half days every day.

Eventually, the School Wide Committee—spearheaded by Reed—looked into ways to broaden the educational opportunities for its preschool population.

In 2007, the school district joined forces with Head Start to develop its Little T-Birds preschool.

“Head Start and the school district had the same goals and shared the same children,” Goodhart said.

Under the joint venture, Head Start takes 3-year-old children two full days a week at the Browns Valley Family Service Center. The Little T-Birds Preschool serves 4-year-old children all day, every day at the public school site.

All-day, every-day preschool is free to anyone in Browns Valley, and costs $14 per day for students outside the district. However, those out-of-town families get their tuition reimbursed if their children go through at least second grade at the school district.

The district and Head Start employ dual registration to reach out to families and children. A flyer is sent to families announcing the registration date and to let them know what documentation they need to bring. The families then come directly to the school to fill out all the required paperwork for both Head Start and the school district. The school district/Head Start then follows up with shared home visits and conferences.

Positive results

The consistency the program brings has been one of the biggest benefits. A coordinated curriculum between the preschool programs and kindergarten provides continuity for both the students and the teachers.

The program’s curriculum is infused from a number of notable specialized methods of teaching, including:

Houghton Mifflin Reading program (Uses authentic literature Big Books, anthologies, Read Alouds, and audio compact discs to provide step-by-step instruction in reading.)

Everyday Mathematics (The federal government’s What Works Clearinghouse gave Everyday Mathematics the highest rating of any commercially published elementary mathematics curriculum.)

Creative Curriculum (An integrated assessment, program planning, and reporting system.)

Responsive Classroom (An approach to teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community.)

Second Step (A program that integrates academics with social and emotional learning. Kids learn and practice vital social skills, such as empathy, emotion management, problem solving, and cooperation.)

SPARK (Sports, Play & Active Recreation for Kids program allows children to work on motor skills throughout the day, without sacrificing any class time.)

Spanish is also part of the students’ curriculum.

An assessment from spring 2008 shows that the program is paying dividends. Ninety-five percent of the preschoolers can name 10 colors; 95 percent can write their own name; 52 percent can demonstrate all consonant sounds (with many students also able to distinguish between consonants and vowels); and 42 percent could count to 100 and beyond.

School officials noted that the recent winter 2008 assessment has provided even more impressive numbers than those listed above.

The cost-effective nature of the joint agreement is another benefit. The school district and Head Start share a number of resources, staff and services. Both Goodhart and Graff said that the intensive planning between the school district and Head Start has been key in making the program successful.
Before and after

Preschool is supplemented by two additional services: a before-school program (running from 7 a.m. until school starts at 8:05 a.m.) and an after-school program (running from 3:25 p.m. to 5 p.m.).

Attendance ranges around 11 to 12 children per day for each session. Goodhart and Graff note that the children who attend both programs vary, while all the children have taken part of the after-school program at least once.

These extra sessions provide children with a seamless day at school. The before- and after-school programs are no extra cost to parents and offer much more than a glorified day care. Each program has a structured schedule. The after-school program offers outside time for gross motor skills, and a number of academic and artistic activities.

Signing up

Another unique aspect of the Browns Valley-Head Start preschool predates their collaboration.

One day back in 2004, when Goodhart and Graff co-taught kindergarten, Tim Poore dropped by their classroom.

Poore, a teacher for the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing from the Midwest Special Education Cooperative in Morris, worked weekly with a deaf/hard-of-hearing student in the district.

Hard of hearing himself, Poore asked Goodhart and Graff if he could “do” a story next week for the kids in sign language.

“Of course,” the teachers answered.

When next week arrived, Poore came into the class, grabbed a book off the shelf and began “reading” the story to the children in sign language. Goodhart and Graff said the kids were immediately enraptured with Poore’s enthusiastic style of storytelling.

The children began to notice repeated signs for repeated words, and, without any prompting, began signing themselves.

“We noticed the kids picked up on it quickly,” Graff said.

Shortly thereafter, Goodhart and Graff approached Reed and the school board about making Poore—and sign language—a regular fixture in their classroom.

With encouragement from Reed, Goodhart and Graff made their pitch at a board meeting—in sign language. Their case was aided by a parent (in attendance for an unrelated matter) who extolled the virtues of sign language, having taught it to his own four kids. It also didn’t hurt that two of the school board members had children in Goodhart and Graff’s class, and were already exposed to sign language.

Soon, Poore started making weekly appearances in the classroom to help build the students’ signing vocabulary.

In his second visit, Poore introduced how to do colors. By the end of the session, every student knew how to sign every main color.

“When they are excited (about something), these little sponges are going to pick up a little bit more,” Graff said. “Kids who have speech impediments can participate. It evens things out for kids who talk or read differently.”
Goodhart adds: “It almost brings tears to your eyes to see delayed students participate in class.”

Graff cited one study on the impact of sign language on young minds. “If you start an infant at 6 months old, they will be a year ahead in vocabulary by age 3.”

Goodhart and Graff were pleased to see the benefits sign language provided the kids—but there was something in it for the teachers as well.

After seeing their students’ original reaction to Poore’s book reading, the teachers asked Poore how to do the sign for “line up.” The signs for “pay attention” and “please be quiet” were among the next words requested. It didn’t take long for sign language to help with classroom management because it forced the students to pay attention, be quiet and watch their teachers’ sign instructions.

“It’s much quieter in the room” with sign language, Graff said.

The signing comes in especially handy in loud lunchrooms and during lockdown drills.

Also, when the first group of signers came through as first-graders, they began to teach their peers in the higher grades up through middle school—and even taught other teachers, too.

Parents have gotten on board with the sign language program, and some of them want to learn, too.

**Trendsetters**

The other elementary teachers have been very receptive to sign language, and they always want to do more staff development workshops in order to implement what they’ve learned into their classrooms.

That interest from within the school district allowed Poore to conduct training sessions with the district’s teachers and other staff. And since Poore no longer works with the district, the task of sign language training has fallen to Goodhart and Graff.

Like the all-day program, the addition of sign language to the curriculum comes at no extra cost to the school district.

Goodhart and Graff said they have received at least two visits from other school districts interested in their programs, and phone inquiries from several others. Both are proud of their school and were proud to represent their district with a pair of presentations at MSBA’s Leadership Conference in January.

Graff sent out an open invitation to anyone interested in either the all-day program or the sign language instruction. “We have so many wonderful things (here). Come on in and check out our classrooms.”

Browns Valley School District serves about 140 students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. The district is located in west-central Minnesota between Big Stone Lake and Lake Traverse, and shares a border with South Dakota.

“We’re a small community, but big things happen here,” Goodhart said.

Bruce Lombard is the Associate Director of Communications for the Minnesota School Boards Association. You can reach him at blombard@mnmsba.org.

If you’d like to know more about the Browns Valley School District/Head Start preschool program, or the impact of sign language use for young students, call Barb Goodhart or Jen Graff at 320-695-2103, or e-mail them at bgoodhart@brownsvalley.k12.mn.us or jgraff@brownsvalley.k12.mn.us.

**Additional links:**

- Little T-Birds Preschool
  - [www.brownsvalley.k12.mn.us](http://www.brownsvalley.k12.mn.us)
- Browns Valley Head Start
  - [www.wcmca.org](http://www.wcmca.org)
- American Sign Language Pro
  - [http://www.aslpro.com](http://www.aslpro.com)
- Houghton Mifflin
  - [http://www.hmco.com](http://www.hmco.com)
- Everyday Mathematics
  - [http://everydaymath.uchicago.edu](http://everydaymath.uchicago.edu)
- Creative Curriculum
  - [http://www.creativecurriculum.net](http://www.creativecurriculum.net)
- Responsive Classroom
  - [http://www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)
- Second Step
  - [http://www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)
- SPARK
  - [http://www.sparkpe.org](http://www.sparkpe.org)
In Spring 2008, responding to a failed operating levy, Osseo Area School District made $15 million in budget cuts for the 2008–2009 school year. Our goal was to make these cuts, representing more than 10 percent of our annual discretionary operating budget, while continuing to move forward our strategic plan under the mission: “to inspire and prepare all students with the confidence, courage and competence to achieve their dreams; contribute to community; and engage in a lifetime of learning.”

The budget cuts included closing two elementary schools, and repurposing several others. This repurposing included moving our science and technology magnet program to a larger building, changing two elementary schools to a pre-K–3 configuration and changing one elementary school to a 4–6 configuration. Both the proposed closing and the repurposing of schools brought out an engaged and organized group of parents who felt adversely affected by the proposal and disagreed strongly with the proposal.

That period of time was one of the most difficult in my 12 years as a board member. However, the board was able to successfully make a mission-driven decision and survive the angry parent backlash. We are continuing to move our mission forward after last fall’s school board election. The following are my personal thoughts on what I learned from this experience.
LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned from this experience can be summarized with the following two points:

There will be people unhappy with the decision, no matter how “right” it is for the entire system. Many who disagree will spend a significant amount of their time and effort trying to attack you over the process used to arrive at the decision.

There will be far more people who will be able to support the decision, provided they have evidence that you developed a fair process, and implemented it fairly, in arriving at the decision.

The process is critical to the decision, and includes decisions you make and actions you take prior to the time of the budget-cutting decision. The following are the steps we took, starting several years prior to the actual decision.

STEP ONE - BUILD CAPACITY IN THE SYSTEM

Prior to adopting our strategic plan, the school district was actively engaged in building the capacity of the system for our plan. This included activities to get the staff ready, such as training on building trust within the system and designing and facilitating effective meetings, and engaging the community through a Parade of Schools and multiple community cafes.

STEP TWO - STRATEGIC PLAN

Once the system was ready, the board approved a process for the development of a strategic plan that consisted of a mission, core values and strategic objectives. The process employed parents, students, staff and other community members to gather a diverse set of perspectives. The result was our strategic plan, which the board adopted without modification.

STEP THREE - ALIGN THE SYSTEM

We did not want the strategic plan to gather dust on the shelf. Rather, we wanted it to be a living document that would guide us in our decisions. To do that, we needed to:

- Develop key strategies,
- Develop specific results statements that implement the key strategies,
- Develop evaluation metrics,
- Ensure that system resources are aligned to produce the results.

These first three steps all occurred prior to the failed levy and the need to cut $15 million. However, they were critical to the success of all the steps that followed.
STEP FOUR - ENSURE EXPERTISE

There are two components to ensuring expertise. First, you need to have the right people on the bus. To the extent you cannot do this with your employees, you need to get outside experts to fill any gaps in internal expertise.

The outside expert is also critical in any school closing and repurposing. This is always an emotional issue for many parents, and you need an outside, independent party to help ensure that the decision is made as objectively as possible. An objective third party can play a critical role in helping the process earn respect and credibility among those who want to support you, but need to see evidence of a fair process.

STEP FIVE - AGREE TO THE PROCESS

While the board has the ultimate authority to make the decision, it is critical that a process is developed to gather the information necessary to make that decision. In a sense, the board does not determine the decision; rather, it develops a process that leads to the decision. There are several key aspects to consider:

Ensure expertise – You need to get the right group of people together to implement the process. These are the “experts” who will help lead the board to a decision.

Key parameters – These are the criteria, determined by the board, which the experts use in creating a proposal. These criteria are consistent with the strategic plan, but offer more detail that is necessary to develop the proposal. Key parameters are the items the board wants the experts to consider, as well as the items that are off-limits.

Single recommendation – Like all board decisions, the Superintendent needs to make a recommendation to the board for a decision, based on the work of the experts. It is then the board’s work to critically analyze the recommendation and suggest modifications for the experts to analyze.

Engage the community – The community needs to see both the recommendation and the reasoning behind it. It’s also important to offer multiple opportunities and forums for the board to receive feedback from the public.

STEP SIX - MAKE A MISSION-DRIVEN DECISION

That says it all. The decision needs to be consistent with your mission, core values and strategic objectives.

STEP SEVEN - TRANSITION WELL

First and foremost, do not make a decision if you cannot devote the resources to effective implementation. The closing and repurposing of schools brings considerable change to students, parents and staff. Your administration needs to develop transition teams that include both staff and community members. This team will work immediately after the decision and continue into the next school year.

The board stays out of the work of the Transition Team, but does receive regular updates, along with the rest of the community.

STEP EIGHT - STAY THE COURSE

Have faith that your decision—aligned with the strategic plan and based on evidence developed in a thoughtful, independent process, employing the requisite expertise—is the right decision. It is now time to reflect on the process and any lessons learned, and continue making decisions consistent with your mission and core values as expressed in your strategic plan.

John Nelson is a 12-year member of the Board of Education for Osseo Area Schools ISD 279, a district serving eight communities in the northwestern suburbs of Minneapolis. Osseo was selected to present a workshop on this topic at the recent National School Boards Association annual conference in April.
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Q&A with U.S. Education Secretary

Arne Duncan calls the economic stimulus package “a staggering opportunity,” a phrase that also could describe his role as the new U.S. Secretary of Education.

At 44, the former Chicago Public Schools superintendent is arguably the most powerful education secretary in history with, thanks to the stimulus package, more than $100 billion at his disposal to improve the nation’s schools, universities and early childhood programs. With that opportunity, he says, comes the responsibility to make schools better and more responsive to the needs of children.

“Our motto is, ‘We’ve got to work fast, and we’ve got to work smart,’” he said in an interview with American School Boards Journal Senior Editor Lawrence Hardy.

That motto is similar to the one touted by President Obama, Duncan’s friend and frequent basketball buddy. The two share a lot in common. Both lived in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood. Both attended Harvard (where Duncan graduated magna cum laude in 1987). Both love basketball (Duncan played professionally in Australia, where he met his future wife). Both are said to be good listeners and problem solvers.

And both face tremendous expectations from a public eager to see the economy rebound and the public schools improve.

Here are excerpts from the interview:
What will the stimulus package do for schools?

There have never been these kinds of resources—nothing even comes close to what’s going to education. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try and get dramatically better.

What’s so important to the President and to me are three core philosophies—core values. First and foremost is to protect kids. Secondly, it is to save and create jobs. And third is to push an aggressive reform agenda.

So what does it enable us to do? A couple of things. To start, it basically helps us stave off what I think was going to be an educational catastrophe—literally hundreds of thousands of jobs being lost across the country due to the declining economy. I also think we have to get dramatically better now. The status quo is not good enough, but we absolutely couldn’t afford to get worse at this point. If class size had gone from 28 to 40, if the social workers, the counselors, the librarians were laid off, and if college professors ended up on the unemployment line rather than teaching kids, that would have just been an absolute disaster.

What do you mean by “protect kids?”

I think we have to do dramatically better for children. Every decision, every policy, every budget discussion, I start with: “What’s best for kids?” That’s the foundation of all this. I think we protect kids by keeping their teachers, keeping their professors working. And I think we help kids get dramatically better through the Race to the Top Fund (Duncan’s $5 billion in discretionary funds to encourage states to raise standards).

I think states have to raise the bar significantly. We want to think about common high standards—college-ready, career-ready, international benchmarks. We’re calling this the Race to the Top Fund for a reason. So much of what we’ve seen, quite frankly, in too many places, has been a race to the bottom. It hurts children.

Across the country, tens of millions of children are being told they’re OK, they’re meeting standards, when they’re really not. Our children today are competing not with children down the block or in the neighborhood across the street; they’re competing with children internationally. They’re competing with children in India and China.

We want to put in place great assessments so students will know where they are against those high standards. We want to create great data systems so we can track student performance over time and track how teachers are doing.

I want to put a lot of resources into really thinking very differently about teachers and principals. I fundamentally believe that talent matters tremendously in this game, and I want us to really think creatively about how we recruit and retain teachers, how we keep that great talent in teaching, and how we help encourage that great talent to go to communities that have been historically underserved, whether it’s inner-city or rural, whatever it might be. It’s a chance to be extraordinarily creative.

It might be 10 states. It might be 15. It might be 20. We want states that are really willing to try and break through on this and do something of extraordinary significance to help lead the way.

Do you support national standards?

What I want is a much higher bar, and I want it to be a bar where everybody can look each other in the eye and say, “If our students are really hitting this bar, they’re going to be ready to compete against the best and brightest.” Not just here, but again, throughout the world.

The idea of 50 different states doing their own thing simply doesn’t make sense. I call it the “50 different goal posts,” sort of the race to the bottom. What bothers me most is I think we’re lying to children. I think many states are telling them they are meeting standards, which, in most people’s minds, means you’re doing a pretty good job. And we’re telling parents they are meeting standards when, in fact, they are being set up for educational failure. They don’t have the skills to graduate from high school, let alone be successful in college. So I’m going to challenge that.

Many school board members and administrators are frustrated with No Child Left Behind’s demands and sanctions. What would you say to them as Congress prepares to reauthorize the law?

What I’ve said from the start is, philosophically I agree with it. Obviously, there are significant implementation challenges. What we want to do is just be very, very pragmatic. Things that are working—we’re going to build on them. Things that aren’t working, we’re going to fix.

I think we need to rebrand it. To me, No Child Left Behind is about the bottom. I want something that’s inspirational, and aspirational, that’s moving folks to the top. And I think we need to raise the bar. The expectations are, frankly, too low.

Again, I go back to great teaching. Great principals matter tremendously. As we go into reauthorization, I want to really think about how we shine a spotlight on great talent and get that great talent where we need it most.
How will you use the stimulus money to attract excellent teachers?

I want to recruit the best and the brightest. Actually one of the benefits of a tough economy is that more young people are going to look at teaching as a possibility. I think what I can do—is really get out there and say, “If you want to serve your country, come teach. Come teach in the city. Come teach in our rural areas. Think about math and science.” There’s a huge opportunity to recruit the next generation of great, great talent that can help shape public education in our country for the next 25 or 30 years.

And I want to really think about how we recognize and reward talent. I want our best teachers to be rewarded differently. I want our best teachers to be rewarded even more if they go work in hard-to-staff communities. I want to reward great principals. There’ve been lots of disincentives, historically, for great talent to go where it’s needed most. I want to really flip that. I want to create some very significant incentives to get great talent working with the children in communities that have been, I would argue, underserved for far too long.

It’s a very extraordinary opportunity to build upon that sense of patriotism, commitment, and service to others, and say “Let’s get the best and the brightest in our country to come make a difference in our students’ lives.” The impact of that has the chance to be amazing.

Any closing thoughts?

To me, it’s an extraordinary time in history. We’re absolutely at a time of national crisis, I would argue, both economically and in terms of education. It’s also this time of historic opportunity. I think there’s so much we can do to help children—help more young people go to college. And I feel so lucky to have this chance. It is an amazing opportunity to make a difference.

Lawrence Hardy is the Senior Editor for the American School Board Journal. This article was reprinted with permission from ASBJ, April 2009.
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It takes two to do the partnership tango, and at the heart of every really solid board/superintendent working relationship that I have observed over the years is a superintendent who is truly what I call “board-savvy.” You will know a board-savvy superintendent by his or her: (1) positive attitude toward the school board; (2) commitment to playing a leading role in building board governing capacity; and (3) knowledge and expertise in the school governing “business.”

First and foremost, the board-savvy superintendent sees the school board as a precious asset to be deployed fully on behalf of the educational mission of the district. The board-savvy superintendent is not defensive in dealings with the board, and definitely does not see working with the board as a damage-control challenge.

To judge from the questions I continue to hear from audiences of superintendents around the country, unfortunately, the damage-control philosophy is far from dead, and many superintendents see a large part of their CEO job as keeping their boards from meddling in matters they feel are best left to the professional educators and administrators. Any school board that’s recruiting a new superintendent has a huge stake in making sure its new chief executive officer isn’t one of these old-time defensive types, but is truly board-savvy.
This isn’t the place for a comprehensive discussion of superintendent recruitment. The point I want to make is that in addition to the standard attributes and qualifications your school board will look for in a new superintendent, you want to make sure that the candidate’s philosophical and operational views on governing and on the board-superintendent partnership are in sync with the board’s. To be blunt, if a board hires a superintendent who is worried more about defending executive prerogatives from meddling board members than about helping the board realize its potential as a governing body, then board capacity-building will become a frustrating battleground rather than a matter of creative board/superintendent collaboration.

Making sure that the board and its potential superintendent are in sync requires, first, that board members actually understand what they are looking for in this regard (otherwise, synchronization is impossible) and, second, that the matter be explored in-depth during the interviewing and reference checking. Not addressing this matter during the recruitment and selection process can doom the partnership from the get-go.

To take a real-life example, a decade or so ago a school board had found a superintendent candidate who appeared perfect for the job—articulate and polished at the lectern, highly knowledgeable on educational issues, and the master of key functions such as strategic planning, curriculum development, capital planning, financial management, and the like. But during the interview process, no one had taken the trouble to ask probing questions about his views on the governing function and the board/superintendent partnership. It did not appear necessary; after all, he had never run into trouble with a board before, so far as they could tell, and he really seemed to enjoy interacting with board members during the interview process.

Only during this superintendent’s second year on the job did serious tension develop in the relationship, as a majority of board members grew committed to the board’s becoming a higher-impact governing body that engaged its members more proactively and creatively in decision-making. Confronted with the demand that he provide assistance in helping the board make this critical transition, the superintendent showed his true colors. Retreating behind a barrier of formal “we-they” ends and means policies (essentially rules), he resisted in every way possible short of outright defiance any deeper board involvement in strategic decision making or the implementation of a stronger standing committee structure. His idea of partnership, as it turned out, was a clear, black-and-white division of labor between the board’s “ends”-focused work and the staff’s “means”-focused functions. The break eventually came, but at a high cost that might have been prevented by asking the right questions during the recruitment process.

Experience has taught me that board members’ being very direct, listening carefully, and asking follow-up questions to clarify points is the ticket to determining whether there is a close enough philosophical fit to support and sustain a positive working relationship over the long run. For example, here are some important questions that discerning board members have asked their potential superintendents in the area of governance and the board/superintendent partnership. Keep in mind that this is only a sampling, and for each question there might be a number of follow-up questions:

- We are really interested in being a high-impact governing board that makes a significant difference in the affairs of our district. What, in your experience, are the characteristics of a truly effective school board? More specifically, would you describe the governing role and governing work of such a board?
Would you describe how you helped your last board build its capacity to govern more effectively?

What concrete steps might you take as our superintendent to help us become a higher-impact governing body?

Can you think of any barriers that might get in the way of developing our governing capacity, and how do you think we might deal with them?

Taking the areas of strategic planning and annual budget preparation, at what particular points—and exactly how—do you think the board should be involved?

In your experience, what are the characteristics of a really positive and productive board/superintendent working relationship?

What steps can you take as our superintendent to make sure that our working relationship remains healthy?

What are the characteristics of an effective process for board evaluation of superintendent performance?

Of course, you will also want to make sure that your reference checking process includes probing questions intended to determine how board-savvy your candidate is. There is no reason why your superintendent search committee would not contact 2 or 3 of the past school board presidents that the candidate worked with, asking in-depth questions about the candidate’s board development philosophy and initiatives, how the candidate involved the board in strategic planning, budgeting, and performance monitoring, what kind of superintendent performance evaluation process was employed, and the like.

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By all accounts, 2008 was a bad year to pursue an operating levy referendum in the Robbinsdale Area Schools—or many other districts in the state. We faced a dramatic general election, grim economic projections, and the memory of a failed 2007 referendum. Add to that fallout from a smear campaign against the board and administration, orchestrated in part by a perennial, out-of-state school-levy opposer, and a lawsuit filed against the state by community members claiming the unconstitutionality of the Campaign Fair Practices Act, and you had doubt, confusion, and mistrust throughout the seven Robbinsdale cities.

In late winter, however, it became clear that a levy referendum was exactly what many in the community were calling for. So in May, setting aside conventional wisdom about this being much too late to initiate such a large undertaking, a small group presented to the board and administration, more than 1,000 signatures calling for a referendum question—two, actually—on the ballot in November.

The short story is that the board voted to put two questions on the ballot, and through November 4 we conducted an all-hands-on-deck, community-led campaign that culminated in voters approving a $9.4 million referendum by a margin of about 55-45 percent.
The long story is, of course, complicated, but in hopes that others can learn from both our success and mistakes, we have captured here much of what we think led to our ultimate victory.

We Had to Stop the Bleeding

Levy referendums were originally designed as means for school districts to go above and beyond…excess levies, they were called.

Times have changed.

Like so many districts, Robbinsdale had already cut deeply in the areas of teacher-student ratios, fine arts, and out-of-school time; classrooms at all age levels were overflowing, valuable formal and informal learning opportunities were becoming more expensive and less accessible, and rapidly changing demographics in areas such as mobility and English Language Learners were putting additional strain on an already stretched-to-the-breaking-point budget.

In the face of state and federal failure to adequately fund education mandates and keep school funding on pace with inflation, our hands were tied. Either we went to the voters asking for help to stop the bleeding, or cut programming to a point from which it would take years to recover both in terms of quality and reputation.

The outlook was bleak.

We had, however, an active core of advocates committed to the question of “how we will pass the referendum,” not if. We borrowed another mantra from a 2001 campaign: “Failure is not an option.”

With that determination, we forged ahead. Do we know why we ultimately met with success? Not exactly, of course, as so many factors come into play. But we have been able to identify the top 10 things we think we did right:

Early on we identified the key evidence-based community-wide benefits of property values, lower crimes rates, and economic development and used them as touchstones when new issues and concerns arose. Our conviction was that regardless of your age or stage in life, everyone benefits from strong schools. This focus helped us respond thoughtfully and on our own terms when criticisms, complaints and challenges arose.

A YouPlusTwo (or, U+2) message gave an entry point to every parent to be involved in even a very small way in the campaign. It was based on voter turnout projections and the calculation that if every district parent voted yes and recruited two non-parent voters to also vote yes, the referendum would pass.

We canvassed, canvassed, canvassed. Our goal was to reach every voter seven times with the call to vote yes and why. That included print materials mailed and distributed at sanctioned events, letters every week to the editor of our community paper, nearly 2,000 lawn signs (sometimes placed through cold calling at prime locations), a radio appearance, door knocking and literature drops at nearly all of the 46,000 homes and apartments in the area, phone banking targeting previously confirmed yes voters encouraging them to get to the polls and U+2, thousands of buttons featuring our bold, simple YES281 campaign logo, and a local cable access program filmed by one of our students and featuring campaign leaders and a parent.

We used social media and networking including “e-blasts,” Facebook, and a Web site expertly maintained by a former student and written and designed by freelance writers and a designer all of whom volunteered their time. The messages were at times excessive, but we made sure we kept “in front of” our constituents during the most information-flooded campaign season in our lifetimes.

We demanded fair access when the somewhat amorphous Vote No campaign appeared in various public venues such as local media.

We came from different perspectives in terms of what is working well in the district and what needs to change. While that often made things take longer or be unsatisfying for some, it strengthened our overall approach.

We worked to gain the district’s trust while maintaining autonomy, though because we were at times critical there was wariness about that on both sides. In the long run, it was incredibly valuable to be able to say, “We trust these people though we don’t always agree…and that means that even if you don’t like everything they are doing and saying, you can be on board with this.”

We visited with and gained the trust of many elected officials, some of whom endorsed the referendum through a paid ad in the local paper.

We didn’t worry about those who vote no out of general opposition to raising taxes. We didn’t expect to be able to change their minds. We did, however, address “hot button” issues such as fiscal responsibility and open enrollment that can lead to no votes based on unhappiness with district management or practices.

We created communication channels that streamlined processes and reduced the number of opportunities for miscommunication. Our graphic designer was, for example, the conduit to our printer.
Far From Perfect, But it Worked

Was it all good? Did we run the best campaign possible? Surely not. We should have started earlier. Also, many days there were too many e-mails to make sense of what was urgent and what needed to wait. We often ended up doing things ourselves because we didn’t leave time or energy for recruiting volunteers. Better communication with business leaders about how referendum dollars are based on market value, not net tax capacity, meaning businesses aren’t hit as hard as they may anticipate, would have brought more of them on board. And it’s fair to say that while we had thousands of people doing things like U+2, roughly 90 percent of the work fell on the shoulders of 10 or 15 headstrong, get-stuff-done team members.

Regardless, it worked and we got want we wanted for our kids, our schools, and our community. This was just one step in the process of ensuring all students have access to high-quality education, but it kept us out of the quicksand of millions of dollars of cuts in the most trying economic times in recent history. And the lessons we learned may help districts across the state this year to convince their voters to do the same.

Jennifer Healy was the chair for the Yes Robbinsdale Citizens’ Group. To reach her, you can write to jengw@comcast.net.

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We get hundreds of calls at the MSBA office every week. Some may be problems that the board is facing with the community or superintendent, and how members can best deal with them. But what if the problem is your own board? We get many calls as well from boards that have a member who wants to be the Lone Ranger or the member who wants to micromanage, despite the wishes of the rest of the board. As much as we’d like to think all of our boards are high-functioning, there will be times when boards turn dysfunctional. Here are three of the most common questions I receive from boards heading sideways:

**What do I do with a board member who takes it upon himself/herself to tell the superintendent or staff what to do, resulting in micromanagement?**

My first suggestion is to have the board chair approach this member to talk about the mutual expectations of board members with board members, and board members with the superintendent and staff. Everyone needs to understand the systems and processes in place and the parameters. Studies in good governance would suggest that board members are responsible for the beginning and the ends – let the superintendent and staff explore and implement the means (the middle). This is their full-time job and it’s why you hire good people.

**Q:** How many board members does it take to screw in a light bulb?

**A:** None, it’s up to the board to say “let there be light.”
It’s up to the superintendent to decide if it will be incandescent, fluorescent, candle, solar or neon.

Then, it’s up the board to evaluate the quality of lighting.

**Usually the follow-up question is: What if the problem person IS the board chair?**

I would suggest that the vice chair (if you have one) and/or the treasurer approach the chair to have the same discussion. Who better to keep each other “in check” of our mutual board expectations than our board peers? Do not have the superintendent do it. This is like you going to your boss and letting him/her know that you’ve noticed they haven’t been doing their job lately. It just doesn’t work.

**We have a board member that never comes prepared and is always late. What do we do?**

There is nothing like the sound of the envelope of your board packet opening at the meeting. You’ve read and studied the information and this board member hasn’t even looked at it! Someone needs to talk to this person. Again, the chair is the first avenue of approach. Don’t assume the board member is doing it on purpose. Explore why this may be happening. Possibilities I’ve heard are:

*I don’t understand what I should study and need to review before the meeting.*

Match the board member with a mentor from the board. They could meet or call each other ahead of time to discuss how the support materials, meeting and agenda will work together.

**The meeting times don’t work for me.**

Whenever possible, when you set meeting times and dates, make sure that they work for everyone. Changing the meeting time, a half hour later or earlier, could really make a difference. Make sure you follow the open meeting law and allow for a sufficient amount of time to post the meeting.

**My board packet doesn’t show up until the day before or the day of the meeting.**

I encourage boards and superintendents to check in with each other periodically to find out when board packets are arriving at the board members’ homes. Especially in rural areas, we’ve found that packets could arrive anywhere from Thursday to Monday for an individual board member. Everyone deserves a reasonable amount of time to study and review.

**Many questions end with: How do they do it in other districts?**

While we have a range of suggestions we can share with you on many topics, our most common answer is: “Every district does it differently.” Keeping in mind federal and state guidelines/regulations and basic parliamentary procedure, every meeting, in every district I’ve attended, truly is different. Meeting location, setup, who attends and participation can vary. As a board, talk about past practice, which could have set a precedent. It may be the time to change that past practice. Then, decide how you want to move forward. Do what works best for your board, staff, students and community.
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Contact: Tiffany Rodning, Deputy Executive Director/Association Services

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