

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

June 2018 Vol. 32, No. 2

Editor: Jeff Stratton

Balance pressure and support

By Robert M. Avossa, Ed.D., Senior Vice President/Publisher of Education Products

The tension between the schoolhouse and the district office seems to have always existed, regardless of how large or small a district may be, and it can become a board issue if not addressed early on. Underlying resentments and conflict become especially evident when it's time for annual salary negotiations, when budgets get cut, when resources get stretched too thinly, and when something goes wrong in a very public way and fault must land somewhere. Some time ago, I had noticed the district office vs. schoolhouse discord plays out most visibly on social media — where each group wonders what the other “does all day” and asserts, “They wouldn't last a day in my shoes.”

As a former superintendent, I have long known the tension that arises in part from a legitimate lack of understanding and appreciation for one another's role in achieving the vision of helping each learner reach his or her fullest potential. It's easy for people to get tunnel vision when their head is down working 10-hour days out of a commitment to their work.

The irony of having such committed personnel is that they get so focused on *their* work, they risk losing sight of *the* work, subsequently jeopardizing the very foundations necessary for our work to thrive — relevance, empathy, service, and ultimately, culture.

Wanting a radical reset to the attitudes and impressions I saw playing out on social media and at the watercooler, I directed that a calendar invite

be sent to all individuals in the role of director and above to set aside a day for assignment to a classroom teacher.

Three directors immediately declined the invitation, believing it to be optional. The executive team fielded questions about whether I realized how hard it was going to be for everyone to give up an entire day in the office. When it was understood that everyone, including myself, would be committing the day to a classroom, anxiety gave way to excitement as district staff called their assigned teachers to review lesson plans and the day ahead of them.

The night before, I sent out a reminder to the team that they were to be fully engaged and without their cellphone and laptop. Everyone, from our transportation director, to our general counsel, to a board member, would be heading to school. For many, it would be the first time in a classroom — ever. For others, it would be the first time an entire day was spent in the classroom in nearly a decade.

No one picked their assignment, including me. I was assigned to a fourth-grade elementary class.

My day was extraordinarily eye-opening. I was paired with a truly dedicated teacher who was in tune with the progress of students with varying ability levels. The energy at the school was infectious, and the students seemed genuinely excited to be in class.

Despite the fact that my teacher was well-prepared for the day and had transitions down to a

continued on next page

science, the periods and the overall school day felt way too short. I knew teachers were crunched for time, but the day left me viewing time as a true commodity for classroom learning. I left asking, how can we get more time for our teachers? Another member of our team described a completely different experience at a high school on a block schedule — 90 minutes of planning, a full lunch period, and three classes. This led to discussions of equity between grade levels, contact hours for teachers, and best practices for student instruction.

During our leadership debrief, the issue of time and the fact that there didn't seem to be enough of it was easily the most reoccurring observation. Finally, district leaders had a better understanding of why school personnel didn't read emails consistently — because they didn't have time to or weren't assigned to a classroom and traveled throughout the building all day. District leaders in payroll and other support divisions talked among one another about the need to make the teachers' workflow as easy as possible, with the fewest clicks possible — noting redundancies in our reporting systems and online workflow.

I also noticed that the many decisions my assigned teacher had to make during the day were exhaustive. Others observed the same, concluding some of the on-the-fly decisions could have been avoided if key processes were improved in the school — like letting everyone know the library is closed or that another teacher on the team had a substitute for the day. We learned that we could help improve this with more onboarding for new principals.

Leadership assigned to special ESE units were overwhelmed with the demands of the day — diaper changes, spoon feedings, student restraint, and endless documentation of each student's day for parent and student files. Conversely, career educators now leading in early childhood and the curriculum division noted strengths and weaknesses in teachers' depth of knowledge questioning and student engagement. This reinforced a key message I had belabored even while our student data was showing significant improvement — we couldn't take our foot off the gas; we still had

a long way to go. Finally, lunch duty, parent pickup, after-school tutoring, and even detention rounded out the experiences of the district leadership team. Ultimately, every leader walked away with an appreciation for the complexities and challenges of the work in the schoolhouse. I even heard a few say, "I could never be a teacher."

Emptying the district office of senior staff also provided an opportunity for our mid-level managers to lead a division without a safety net for the day. Unable to quickly text, call, or email directors, they had to make decisions based on their own knowledge and experience. Contrary to the belief that directors are terrified to be away from their phones and email, Rome did not burn; it was a standard operational day in all departments and a moment of clarity for district directors potentially holding their staff a little too tightly, or to be more concise, micro-managing.

To maintain the momentum we built around understanding and appreciating one another's contributions to our mission and vision, I would advise reversing the process and assigning school personnel, including teachers, to district leadership for a day. This would help the district to get to a place where no one believes they are in a position of more importance than someone else — the school district wins and loses as a team, and everyone has an important role to play.

Dr. Robert Avossa (@Robert_Avossa) is Senior Vice President and Publisher of Education Products for LRP Publications. Most recently the superintendent of the School District of Palm Beach County, one of the largest school districts in the United States, Dr. Avossa has held various positions in large public-school systems from superintendent to teacher, principal, special education specialist, and district administrator. ■



Robert M. Avossa, Ed.D.
Twitter: @Robert_Avossa