

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

February 2017 Vol. 30, No. 10

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'Tour of Gratitude' boosts teamwork, commitment to mission

The Freeman School District Board in Rockford, Wash., took A Tour of Gratitude as the board superintendent, and leadership team surveyed their district during a day-long work session and give thanks for what they have in the community. Board President Annie Keebler said the Tour of Gratitude was "inspirational and empowering." The idea first came to Keebler two years ago during a board work session. One of the items the board discussed during the session was making time for board reflection and "focusing on the district and what has been achieved in the last five years," Keebler said.

"We thought we just needed a time to think about the district's history, its makeup, what are some of the places we've never seen in a district that spans such a large space," she said.

Superintendent Randy Russell organized the tour in which the board and key staff took a guided bus trip around the district. This gave the board and leadership team time for reflection on past accomplishments, as well as an opportunity to recharge batteries for the coming work. Five board members, all of the principals, Russell, and his leadership team of directors participated in the event.

Keebler said the day strengthened relationships on the board team and with the leadership team while informing the board's work. "I'm not from Rockford, and this helped me understand where our students come from," she said. "It gave me more of a feel for who we are as a board, staff, and students. Building a connection with our kids is something we always have in mind, and the tour did remind us who we are here for."

Group activities during A Tour of Gratitude included: "What are the greatest opportunities to keep improving the school district?," discussion of "Board-Superintendent Relationship & Operating Principles," expectations for the superintendent in 2016-17, and a social and dinner with spouses to conclude the day.

Each area of the tour had a theme or message associated with it.

For example, after the mile-long hike, the superintendent pointed out that all journeys are not over smooth flat ground and worked that into the idea that a leadership team and board are at times required to make difficult decisions on their journey. "Sometimes a team has to go where no one else wants to go," Russell said.

"For me, the idea was saying sometimes you have to keep on pushing," Keebler said.

Keebler, Russell, and the transportation director were the only individuals in the loop for the day. "Participants were told to wear comfortable clothes and tennis shoes," Keebler said. "Our previous work sessions were conducted sitting in chairs, so this one had some anticipation surrounding it," she said.

Other boards have contacted the district about A Tour of Gratitude.

"Superintendents love the idea and have been thinking about how to do something similar in their own community," Russell said. "All communities have some unique, special things -- a company in town, a community college, parks, fishing, or lakes.

"If your team gets into a routine, you can forget you have a special place and a tour such as this can remind you." ■

Tamp down on board conflict with these strategies

The board that finds itself mired in conflict often learns that it is hard to accomplish much as the governing body of a school district. That's why the board president (and really, all board members) have a stake in working through conflicts in a professional manner. Try some of these strategies when your board is having teamwork issues:

1. Understand that conflict on a team such as a board is natural and to be expected.
2. Do not avoid conflicts, because they will fester and linger. Allocate the necessary time to resolve them.
3. Achieve consensus by airing complaints and

disagreements and by giving all views a fair hearing.

4. Use more carrot, less stick. Each party in the conflict must find some "carrot" as a result of achieving consensus.

The president should recognize when conflict is occurring within the team and lead by asking the group to resolve its internal issues. When the board is working through its conflict, it is the president's responsibility to give all board members a chance to air their views. After this has occurred, the president should sum up the board's discussion, while offering his take on what has taken place within the group. ■

Does your superintendent know what the board wants?

If you asked each member of your board to prioritize the five most important duties of the superintendent, would everyone agree? I've served on enough boards to know that's not very likely.

I also know how much friction is caused when individual board members try to impose their own priorities on the superintendent. One may be a fiscal hawk, the other wants to push technology, while two more focus on math skills.

The superintendent spends so much time chasing individual board member priorities that the real work of the school doesn't get done.

It's a bit like being a postman. You don't get the mail delivered if you have to stop and tickle every barking dog.

Setting the district's priorities is an important team effort. The board and superintendent must work together to set common goals for the district so that the administrator has

no doubt in her mind what the board wants to accomplish.

Ask these questions of yourself to check the clarity of the direction the board gives the superintendent:

- Do we have a clear, written job description for the superintendent?
- Do we set specific goals for the superintendent to accomplish?
- Do we pause quarterly for an update on how the superintendent is proceeding in the accomplishment of our goals for the district?
- Are the priorities we set for the superintendent clear enough to evaluate in her annual performance appraisal?

Assess these items as a team and you will be clear on the direction you want the superintendent to lead the district and the progress she is making. ■

Duties of the Board President

The following may be considered as typical duties of a board president:

- Be the presiding officer of the school board meeting.
- Call special meetings of the board when it is necessary to do so.
- See that there is a recording of minutes at each meeting, the legal record of what transpired.
- Sign board minutes after they have been approved by the board.
- Sign documents as a representative of the school board.

- Be the official spokesperson for the board to the media (with superintendent's knowledge and board approval).
- Be the official spokesperson for the board to the community (with superintendent's knowledge and board approval).
- Appoint board members to various board committees.
- Arrange for education through appropriate workshops for all board members.
- Encourage board assessment of its accomplishments. ■