

Spotlight on the Board

Notes from the District 15 School Board Meetings

November 14th, 2007

This was a Special meeting held prior to the Regular Board of Education meeting. The Special meeting was called to identify ways to improve communication between the Board of Education and CTC (Classroom Teachers Council) Leadership.

Board members present included: Tim Millar, Gerald Chapman, James Ekeberg, Kelly Keenan, Sue Quinn and Wendy Rowden. Board member Nancy Lee Carlson was absent.

CTC Leadership members included: Lisa Nuss, Anne Bridges, Judy Osgood, Roxanne Armato, Scott Woldman and Andre Zielinski. Also present were: Robert McKanna, Jean Sophie, Mary Zarr and a few citizens.

Identify Ways to Improve Communication between the Board of Education and CTC Leadership

McKanna, D15 Superintendent – Announced that this was an open meeting but after speaking with the attorneys again, they indicated that these meetings could be held in closed session in the future. However since this meeting was already posted as open, it would have to open.

Board President Tim Millar – Appreciates the CTC leadership coming out tonight. The Board is looking for suggestions on how to improve communications, build a working relationship. Admitted the last few years have been difficult. Premise of the meeting was to introduce new BOE members to CTC and knew that the CTC also had new members.

Board member Sue Quinn – Wanted to also thank CTC for coming to the Communications meeting last month. Said that these are first steps for us (Board and CTC) having more of a dialogue. There have been mechanisms for getting feedback to the Board like the superintendent search focus groups with employees as well as others in the community. A lot of feedback was received. Quinn also remembers reading the 800+ "Conditions of Teaching" surveys that were done last April. Said that is a great way to get feedback but that is one way. It is good to hear but it is not a dialogue. Hoping the Board/CTC can move towards more of a dialogue.

CTC President Lisa Nuss – Appreciates the Board being here. (The CTC leadership introduced themselves with their name, CTC position and their teaching position/building. Board members also introduced themselves.)

Millar – Asked if the CTC had any suggestions on how we can improve – with the community, the Board itself or any operational questions? Said there are challenges of getting accurate information on both sides. With the new Finance committee, the Board has learned a lot about improving information to them. Previously a "cash basis" accounting system was giving them a skewed view. Depending on when the county paid the district, it either looked like we had a lot of money or we didn't.

Quinn – One of the things we are doing on the Finance committee is to have a more open and transparent way to operate. It is accountability to the public and also for the staff/teachers that need to have the same information the public has on what is going on in the district. Quinn thinks communication is the foundation of building trust. One of the

terms she heard a lot from the superintendent's search feedback was that there is a "lack of trust" - everybody said lack of trust in one way or another. Thinks that means different things to different people. Asked if the CTC had any suggestions of ideas of what the Board/CTC could talk about? Not necessarily at this meeting but perhaps at subsequent meetings? Wants to identify topics because that helps to focus what we can talk about.

Anne Bridges, CTC Executive Director – Asked what does that mean to you as a group – the lack of trust? When you (the Board) read the responses, how did you feel about that and in what areas?

Quinn – Stated it came from different areas depending on what group was speaking about the lack of trust. Thinks it comes down to information. For example: if information is given out in a press release, can it be believed or not? Do they really mean what they say? Thinks it would be good to get to the point where we (Board/CTC) are more routinely talking. Asked what the CTC thought lack of trust meant to their representatives/teachers?

Bridges – Thinks it is really important to people that if you ask them for their input that you not only read the input, but you validate it. That you listen to it, especially if it is classroom concerns – the out-of-level math, the reading programs. Then the feedback is used in some way. Bridges thinks that oftentimes people think they give input and then what is really done with the input? Was happy to hear Quinn say that she read 825 surveys, but if that information isn't valuable to you in some way?

Quinn – It is hard to say what to do with 825 responses. What she got out of it, especially being a brand new Board member at the time, was a pulse of what people are feeling and thinking. Also the very strong impression of it being honest. Thinks that is very valuable to get a true reading of what is going on. It was also good to hear repeated things. It was collated by school and some items kept popping up – so thought there must be something there. Being a new Board member at the time, she didn't jump into doing anything but it helps give her some bearing. Understands what Bridges means about the feeling of giving input, energy and then it goes into a "black hole". Thinks the community feels that way too. There are a lot of community committees for people to come in, talk and then what happens? There is no feedback to close that loop. That is one thing that the Board is trying to do with the Communication committee and the Financial Report Card (FRC). Wanted to bring it to the committee to get input so it can make a difference and it did. The FRC was modified with community input. Said that the Board needs to take a responsibility for feedback. Would appreciate ideas on how to do that.

Millar – Said that the Board doesn't get involved with every issue, there is a management chain (McKanna, Zarr, etc.) until it really gets escalated. Board has to respect our staff just like respecting that a parent will go to the teacher first with an issue, or principal. The Board, in general, is policy driven as opposed to specific building issues. Wanted to clarify what the Board can do – without the micromanaging label being put on them. It is good to have information of issues of each building – then the Board can ask staff to follow it up as a check and balance. Again, a lot of the authority has to go to staff. Doesn't want to give the false impression that the Board is going to get involved with all of the issues. Thinks even the community doesn't fully understand what the Board can and cannot do. We can only do things as we are sitting here as a Board in public or in closed session meetings. The Board cannot communicate otherwise or have authority as individuals. It is unique, and different than the CTC because the CTC can actually meet and talk without it having to be in public. There are only a handful of things the Board can actually talk about in a closed session. Wants to make sure that there is an understanding of what the Board's role is. The topic of communication came up to him that we are not communicating well – that the communication is not 100% accurate. Said that in a corporate environment, news does not travel as fast as it travels in this school district and it is not typically 100% accurate.

Bridges – Asked for an example.

Board member James Ekeberg – Mentioned the busing issue. Said we (Board) sat here, the motion was to have an emergency acquisition of 10 buses through Laidlaw to solve the problems at CLA. That was our first choice. The secondary thought was that we might alter start times. But it was clearly stated in the motion that the first choice was to hire the buses and then changing start times was something to consider. That was not the Board's first choice and it had been voted on. Then we get emails, "why are you changing the start times?" Well we are not. Or at least the meeting I was at, we are not. Staff didn't recommend changing start times. It is a thing to consider but when Tim (Millar) talks about the meeting being in public and voting – that was the vote. That is the part that people have to pay attention to. That was the action that we (Board) took. All the other was conversation. It is a possibility, there is a lot of possibilities – to scrap the whole thing and say "let's go back to four tiers; we don't believe what they did a few months ago." That's the kind of thing we heard from the community. I was at that meeting, I voted. That was the consensus of the entire Board.

Quinn – The Board has seen multiple instances of that. It is so important for us to work in a partnership. We can only operate in the confines of the law. We rely on the superintendent and staff to do their part in taking what we (Board) decided and making it happen. And of course, you (CTC) make it happen every day on the ground. If we are working together and communicating well, things like that will die quickly because they won't catch fire and burn before we can put it out. Keeping the calm is a byproduct of a partnership. When we talk about parents and teachers working together – it is because it is in the best interest of the kids. Quinn sees the Board as representing the parents and the CTC represents the teachers – wants to work together as a partnership on an organizational level.

Bridges – If we are here to be really honest thinks that the trust issue goes back several years. There were several newspaper articles where we (CTC) were slammed for being too quiet. There are an awful lot of hurt feelings over teachers being slammed in the paper and comments being made in the community. It is the same type of thing – by the time one person hears it, it may be part of what was really said or it may be the whole thing. But the hurt feelings are the same. Wanting there to be trust and working together are sometimes overshadowed by things that happened and words that were said and the way things were handled. Thinks that going forward from today on is important. If the goal is to be transparent, it has to be not just us.

Quinn – Thinks everyone agrees with that. Thinks it is important to acknowledge what has already occurred, not ignore it. Feelings do linger, it takes time to heal. The important part is to acknowledge that, say yes we have had some pretty tough times all around – a lot of people got hurt, all around. And that's not the way we want to be. We want to move forward, thinks a lot of people want to move forward and work towards improving the state of things. This is a good first step.

Nuss – Thought that Quinn going to schools on the first day of school to meet with teachers was a good first step for teachers to see actions, not just statements. In the past, actions were very clear, definitive actions done publicly and some people were on the Board, some were not. The Board needs to take some action to start restoring that trust. It is a slow process. Right now, everyone is a little guarded. The teachers, as a whole, by nature are very forgiving and a very loving type of group. They do want the relationship to work. Now they are a little guarded and want to move forward but it is going to take some time. There has to be collaboration and it is going to take some action. It is great to hear from the Board and administration that we are appreciated but we need to see it.

Board member Wendy Rowden – Asked what would those actions be?

Nuss – Knows that there have been a lot of issues that have come up in the paper. Public statements in support of teachers would be a great step.

Bridges – Heartfelt statements. You cannot be one thing one week and then backtrack the next week. Or be one thing when you are talking to your own child's classroom teacher and then another thing about this group (CTC leadership) - because we are all part of the teachers.

Nuss – There is no separation between the Union and the teachers. What was publicized is that "we love the teachers but the Union says this". To be very clear, the Union is all 867 of us. There is no difference between the teachers and the Union.

Rowden – Understands what Nuss is saying but confused about the Press statement. We (Board) do not have control over how the Press prints things. But yet there have been, Rowden thinks, deliberate actions to show teachers that we support you individually. Rowden says that she has made huge efforts when she first got on the Board, to get into the buildings. People are always saying "come and see me" – then it was though that never happened. But still Sue (Quinn) and I have continued going to buildings, making an effort to speak to the teachers when we are there. Rowden tries to go to things when she is invited, very often we are not invited, and very often she can't go because of the reality of her life. Thinks in a lot of ways, she is making an effort to show that and am not sure that those things are being acknowledged. Thinks people hang on to where we may be in disagreement, or latch on to the newspaper - hang on to disagreements instead of acknowledging the other things even where we are in agreement.

So often the board is described as contentious and is rightfully so, in many ways. Thinks part of the problem is the Press, they hang on to any divisiveness and make it a huge deal. If people would just go to the source, for example her (Rowden), if someone came to her and said I want to talk about what you said or what you did. She would be more than happy to have that conversation. And explain herself, or explain her rationale of what really happened. What more can be done?

Nuss – Trust is easy to lose and very hard to build. One action that undermines trust has to be offset by one that builds it. It is going to take a long time to undo some of the hurtful things that were out there.

Rowden – Asked but are the ways I am describing are they ways to build trust? Is that what teachers want to see? Do they want to see you coming in and taking an interest in what they are doing? Do they want to think that you actually understand what their job is like?

Bridges – There has to be consistency as well. I see you (Rowden) because you are in my building so I see you do those things. If we are going to be brutally honest, I am going to throw this out there – at the BOE meeting last year when one speaker pretty much bashed teachers the entire time and then came down and high-fived your husband. That sticks in people's minds. Thinks things said like "we really don't care how morale is because the test scores are still high". Thinks that offsets other things – and it is hurtful.

Rowden – Completely understands and cannot be blamed for what somebody did to my husband. Secondly, those things definitely affect morale on both ends. We (Board) have been recipients of the same kinds of thing. But at the same time, I think you are right, it takes a long time for people's feelings – because feelings go both ways – we also have them. I could sit here and say "I am being labeled this way" and yet that was not my actions. My actions I don't feel constitute this label. But how do I overcome that? So I make this effort or this effort and sometimes you feel like well. I'm sure you feel the same way as well. So other than that, I can totally understand that. I didn't even know that that had happened. But somebody happened to know my husband and I don't even know who it was. And that's

where feelings were played on the other end. People were getting really revved up about what was going on with the contract negotiations on both sides for the good and bad. Thinks there was bad behavior was on both sides. So I am sorry for that and I totally understand why that would hurt feelings. But I don't know how to overcome that.

Bridges – Thinks it is hard too. I have worked with you (Rowden) as a parent to a teacher and we had a working relationship. So somebody that doesn't have that, it will take a bit longer. I think an apology goes a long way and is meaningful to a lot of people. Acknowledgement of things that have happened instead of pretending that it didn't happen. I think those are important first steps.

Nuss – It takes a long time for teachers to know they are being heard and not just listened to. Teachers need to feel like they are being heard because really we are here to service the children of this community and we do it quite well. We want to feel like we are supported and our needs are being met to do the job. Sometimes it is hard for a teacher to see from the classroom - if it is the Board making that decision or the administration. Teachers need to think that the administration and the Board acknowledge that they are professional and their input should be held at a higher level.

Bridges – This is a first step. And when things start getting better, the viciousness – and that pretty much ended up what it was – if it is better over time, I think that proves to them (teachers) that we are working together.

Nuss – We have also seen two other contract negotiations since us – and I hope that is more of the model. It wasn't seen as vicious. The custodian contract was done in four sessions. It wasn't public, contentious. Or are we the only ones singled out.

Millar – We (Board) have to separate the business part – the finance part – that was the main disagreements. On the other items, the Board is in 100% agreement of supporting the staff and appreciating the work that you do. Again, our responsibility is for the entire community and managing their funds. That's where we are going to disagree. Not on the other issues which are 90% - it is 10% where most of the friction comes from really.

Bridges – Disagreement is fine. I could disagree with most anybody but if you could come to some at least respectful conversation. I think you could find some ground that is common.

Quinn – Agrees that it doesn't have to be disrespectful. Sees two different issues being alluded to – the financial negotiations side of things and there is the in-between times. Made an analogy to a marriage – there are times when you are going to fight, and it is going to be about money. Because that's what people do, that's what they fight about. But in those in-between times, it really matters to build the relationship so when you have the disagreements; it doesn't turn into the disrespect. It doesn't have to be so vicious and break things down.

Nuss – You have to understand that negotiations aren't all about money. It is also working conditions because we won't go thru it again until the next negotiations. A lot of what we look for in our day-to-day teaching is ways to assist us to deliver a quality education. That is not only those in-between times but negotiations really last for a long time. "We are never really out."

Quinn – Re: the Conditions of Teaching. Thinks there is more agreement than we realize, things like class size, like wanting to have support, give teachers time to collaborate, staff development, things like that. Thinks that is something we can have as future topics for discussion. Like some of the conditions of teaching that really have an impact. That may not be a collectively negotiated as a matter per se. But something that changes from year to year. Maybe if we could start to use that as a focal point, get our commonalities, that we all agree on. We are all coming at it as what is best for kids and how best to deliver that

educational service. You know how to do that. You are the professionals that are doing that service and you know how to make it work for us. Let's find some common ground to start our discussions.

Board member Gerald Chapman – When talking about issues, he has gotten the sense that teachers really want to feel respected. **Nuss** – Replied, that is one piece.

Chapman – Could you elaborate a bit, taking the history of the past out of it, What makes people feel valued? What can we do as a Board, aside from negotiations issues, that would be a good expression of respect to say that I really feel valued?

Nuss – As a Board, there are major decisions being made without teachers input. We are in focus groups, give input on surveys – but the decision has already been made. It is a waste of our time. She has heard over and over that if people just want to make decisions would rather, if they (Board/Administration) are just going to make the decision, don't waste our time because our time is very valuable. We would rather be doing something else if you are not going to listen to what we have to say. You could say the teachers are valued but then things are implemented, that had very little to do with the teachers input. Then they don't feel respected or valued.

Quinn – Hopefully we can have this type of meeting on a regular basis.

Nuss – Thinks that is a good idea, they will brainstorm. Said that the teachers do not want to see a financially irresponsible Board. We would like to work together to maybe solve some problems before we have them. Things have been very reactive instead of proactive. Thinks if there could be regular meetings, thinks that would be good.

McKanna – Suggested before the January 9th BOE meeting from 6 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. in a closed session.

Bridges – Asked what are some of the things the Board came up with as topics to cover with us?

Rowden – Stated that the Board didn't talk as a group – this (meeting) is when they can talk. Rowden agrees that communication is the main thing. Thinks that the misrepresentation goes both ways. For her, she would like to hear specifically what can we do that will help improve the relationship. Rowden thinks that there is some misunderstanding of what the Board's official responsibilities are and what the administration's responsibilities are and the micromanaging pieces always gets thrown. We are feeling the same way as you, as a Board member. Example: I don't have the information and it seems like the decision is already made, what is the point of me saying anything? Then I want this information and that – and then it becomes a burden to the administration and considered micromanaging. It is something that she is still learning but at the same time, doesn't like to be held accountable to decisions that she doesn't feel she has all the information that she needs. Thinks that we (Board) feel the same way you (CTC) do sometimes. Thinks that by understanding the Board's responsibilities and how the Board gets information would be helpful to you as well. Thinks that a lot of times when things are decided and people don't like the decision, it is put on the Board who made the decision. That is without the understanding that we have made the decision based on the best information we (Board) are given.

Mary Zarr, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum – Knows that this meeting is wrapping up in the next couple of minutes. Said that even if we do meet again on January 9th, there is some days to be gained before then. You (CTC) gave, what I thought, two really good examples of how the Board showed that they valued you. You gave the example of Sue (Quinn) coming in on the first day of school. Also speaking of the school visits, that when they (Board) come to see your school and they have made compliments in public about what they have seen and how that meant a lot to you.

Zarr knows that she got a lot of comments from teachers after the retirement ceremony last year about Tim's (Millar) speech being so sincere. They decided it was short enough to be sincere and at the time thought the words were chosen carefully. People said that the speech meant a lot. Is there any other specific examples like that – like a behavior that you would like to see repeated in a genuine way of course? What I think I am hearing from the Board members is - what more can we do? Give us some more of those examples that mean something?

McKanna – Concluded the meeting because it was time for the Regular Board of Education meeting to start and people were waiting to come into the boardroom.

This Special Board of Education meeting concluded at approximately 6:45 p.m. – prior to the start of the Regular Board of Education meeting scheduled for 7 p.m.

Reference made to CTC - Conditions of Teaching survey

Available at: www.ctcteachers.com/COT/COT2007/COT20062007.html

Written by: Jennifer Mondy
fcwnews@comcast.net

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