

What the Future Holds...

A very wise superintendent recently told me a story of how he had been invited to participate on a panel of veteran superintendents. The panel discussion was being held to provide support and information to an audience of new and aspiring superintendents. A question was posed to the panel asking how superintendents could go about building trust within their community. Many offered the typical ideas, such as being on community boards and taskforces, being seen at school events, making sure they got back to everyone who contacted them with concerns, etc. All good advice, but this particular superintendent added, tongue-in-cheek, that the best way to build trust was to first have a crisis, and then handle it well. The challenge to the new superintendents was figuring out how to “handle it well.”

As I started my new position as Superintendent of the Platteville School District on the first of July, those words rang true to me. If ever there were interesting times to begin a career as a superintendent, these must surely be it. Laws related to education have been changing on a nearly daily basis and will take months, maybe even years, to be fully interpreted and implemented. Funding provided to local school districts by the state has been significantly reduced. With the changes in collective bargaining, school districts will virtually need to develop all new policies and procedures related to district employees.

Certainly, school funding and collective bargaining have been in the forefront of the political world; however, there are and will continue to be significant changes in how schools measure and document student achievement. Governor Scott Walker and State Superintendent of Schools, Tony Evers, are working together on a new statewide accountability system. The purpose is to provide Wisconsin residents with more information on how well schools and school districts are preparing students. If the changes at the state level weren't enough, there are major changes coming from the federal level of government in terms of funding, accountability, and achievement expectations. One or two of these changes taken individually might suggest the perfect timing to consider retirement as an option. I'm not going to lie; the cumulative effect is a little daunting.

The panel member answering the question was, of course, Platteville School District's former superintendent, Dean Isaacson. The district owes a debt of gratitude for his exemplary years of leadership and service. That being said, I definitely detected a twinkle in his eye as we talked about the various changes and projects that would necessarily become part of my first year, first months, and even first days on the job. So it would seem that I have the first part of the formula to success at hand...the crisis. I just have to get through the second part...the “handling it well.” The problem is that in order to “handle it well,” I will need the trust and faith of the Platteville Community long before I have had an opportunity to earn it and I humbly recognize this.

There are many reasons to be positive. The Platteville School District is in sound financial shape, better than many in Wisconsin, due to foresight, strong financial management, and investment in technology and facilities over the last years. The district has a dedicated, generous, and hard-working staff that truly cares about students and the Platteville Community as a whole. We would not have been able to absorb the significant cuts in state funding without major reductions in services to students, had

it not been for the voluntary wage and benefit concessions made by the staff. I have watched the school board interact respectfully and make decisions collaboratively, with a focus on the best interest of students and families. The Platteville community has demonstrated over the years that they support education and recognize how important the schools are to the future of our youth and the community as a whole.

Taken all together, the timing to start a career as a superintendent could probably be better, but the place, meaning Platteville, could not be. My mother, a Mount Hope native, used to tell us that setbacks were opportunities to “re-choose” where we were going. We might keep heading down the path we were on, but with greater determination to get further. We might choose another path that would keep us going in the same direction, but with a completely different view along the way. If you have spent time driving the backroads of Southwestern Wisconsin, you can’t help but notice the hills, valleys, and pretty interesting road conditions. There are a few paths that include a short, fast, and rough trip down the hill and a slow, winding, and narrow climb to the top of the next, with a few interesting drop-offs along the way. I think about my first year in the superintendency as being somewhat like that path.

There are many challenges ahead, but I am confident that the Platteville School District will continue to provide an outstanding education to our students when the doors open this fall. We will find ways to keep preparing our students for the next step in their educational journey. There is no question that it will take all of us working together to make it happen.

I look forward to meeting with city leadership, leaders in the Platteville Business Community, UW-Platteville leaders, CESA 3 (Cooperative Education Service Agency) leaders, and Southwest Wisconsin Technical College leadership and to having conversations about how we can “roll our sleeves up,” combine resources and expertise, and continue building an educational system that is the envy of many. I look forward to opportunities to get to know the people that make up the Platteville Community and to better understand their investment, pride, and hopes for our students. Perhaps most of all, I look forward to the opportunity to get to know the students who will walk through our halls in the next year. They are the inspiration that will push us all to give a little more, try a little harder, and smile a little wider as we watch them choose their paths and reach out towards their dreams. I feel privileged to be a part of their lives and positive as I look to the hills ahead. We are, after all, the “Hillmen.”