

Chalkboard

By

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“It takes many brush strokes to paint the portrait of a child”. That simple statement has been the theme of the Gentry Public School District this school year. I write “this school year” because for those of us working 12-month contracts, the year does not end until June 30th.

I always smile to myself when people say to me, “I guess you are glad that another year is over. It must be nice to have summers off.” I usually make some facetious remark like “Well, I am there year round but I am always glad to see the students and the ones who teach them go home.” Perhaps I should construct some other catch phrase with a more positive connotation.

Several years ago one of the district’s school board members took me on a tour of the Flint Creek power plant. My tour happened to be at a time when the plant was off-line for major maintenance. Nothing was broken and the purpose of the plant being non-productive was to perform recalibration activities that would guarantee, when the big turbine returned to service, the mission of the plant would not be interrupted.

In many aspects that is what happens at a public school during the summer. For the year-round employees, summer is one of the busiest times of the year as it is a time of general cleaning and repairs of the facilities. It is a time to restock and refurbish, a time of report filing and a time of retraining. It is also a time to find and replace the staff members who have left the district

In several of my early years as your superintendent, the school district suffered large turnovers in staff. At the time I was not sure whether this was a reflection on my job performance or whether it was merely an exodus of those seeking “greener pastures”. In retrospect, I suspect it was a combination of both. It was during a phase of change and a period when the staff salaries lagged far behind those neighbor schools in Northwest Arkansas. While Gentry is a public school, recruiting and maintaining staff is a competitive process akin to any free market enterprise. Following that line of thinking, I imagine that it comes as no surprise to anyone to discover that teachers, principals, bus drivers, aides, secretaries, counselors, custodians, cooks, counselors, nurses, maintenance workers, and various

specialists would like for their respective wages to mirror “what the market will bear”.

For more than a decade the Gentry school board has labored to bring the salaries of school employees up to a level commensurate to other school districts in our area. They have done that in a time when other costs of operation have skyrocketed. By way of example, compare the cost of diesel for school buses, natural gas, and kilowatts between 1992 to 2004. With your support and with your local tax dollars they have built a middle school, a new vocational agriculture building, a new middle/high cafeteria and maintained existing facilities during that same period of time. They have done it knowing that it costs money to keep both buildings and people maintained. Above all, they have done it with a single purpose in mind- to have the best educational program possible for the children of our school district.

Maybe I have been watching too much television. That last paragraph sounded like I should be ending it with “and I approve of this paragraph”. Whether it sounded like flag-waving or not does not change the truth expressed. The people who govern and manage your school district are working diligently to ensure that when the students return in August clean, safe buildings will be there to house them. Equally and perhaps even more important, will be the having of a competent and professional group of educators and support staff to greet those students on their return. The goal is to spend our resources wisely to do both.

Thus I am always only half-joking when I answer, “I am always glad to see the students and the ones who teach them go home.” Some things need to be done at school that cannot reasonably be accomplished during the instructional day. Although probably an anachronism held over from the remnants of an agrarian society, “summer vacation” does allow for those things to be accomplished.

Simply put, if “It takes many brush strokes to paint the portrait of a child”, then this summer we are learning new artist techniques, buying paint, waxing the studio, tightening the screws in the easel, and replacing any missing brushes.