

Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since I ended the last *Chalkboard* with a promise to delve into the mission of the Gentry School District. If you read that one, you remember I wrote of the roles of different staff members with regard to whether the role, and the person who has that role, serves the organization or whether the role supports the mission of the organization. I made the claim that the classroom instructor supports the mission of the organization and that all other positions support the existence of the organization itself. I alleged also that neither is more important than the other and that neither can exist without the other.

Merriam-Webster's Online dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/mission> defines "mission", as a school district would use the term, as "a body of persons sent to perform a service or carry on an activity" or "a specific task with which a person or a group is charged" or "a pre-established and often self-imposed objective or purpose". While the last meaning is probably most common, all three meanings play a part in determining the mission of a school district. Obviously the school staff is a "body of persons" with a "specific task" that is "self-imposed" (not to mention mandated by law). The following four paragraphs contain the respective current mission statements of the four campuses and the district.

"The primary mission of Gentry Elementary Schools is to work in partnership with students, parents and the community to establish a strong foundation for lifelong learning by providing a safe, nurturing, child-centered environment. As we foster intellectual growth, we will contribute to the emotional, moral, aesthetic, social and physical development of our students . . . a strong foundation for lifelong learning."

"Gentry Middle School, in partnership with parents and community, will provide a safe, standards-based, educational program that will enable adolescents to become successful and adaptable students and citizens."

"The mission of the Gentry High School is to provide the highest quality, comprehensive education for every student, regardless of individual background or ability. Provided with a safe and nurturing environment, the Student will be empowered with the critical thinking skills, problem-solving

abilities, self-discipline and self-motivation that are required for the 21st century.”

“The primary goal of the Gentry Public Schools is to instruct the students of the community so that they will be equipped to live productive, active and satisfactory lives in today's society. To accomplish this we believe those individuals need an opportunity to acquire specific competencies in the following: A] the fundamental concepts of subject matter, B] the development of skills, C] the academic needs of both the college-bound and non-college-bound students, D] A broad understanding of world conditions today, E] the development of self-discipline and appropriate behavioral patterns, F] The development of the individuality of the student through the creative process, G] the development of citizenship, H] the development of an appreciation of literature, music, the pictorial arts and nature.”

Would you argue that any concept expressed above is not valid? Probably not. Does each represent the Gentry entity or could they apply generically to any public school?

For example, compare the above statements to that of Tyson Foods “Core Values” found at <http://www.tyson.com/Corporate/CoreValues.aspx>. “We are a company of people engaged in the production of food seeking to pursue truth and integrity and committed to creating value for our shareholders our customers and our people in the process.”

See any difference in how the mission is worded? Anybody see the word “chicken”?

I have been touting a book by Jim Collins, Good to Great, that I was exposed to this summer at a leadership conference hosted by the Arkansas Leadership Academy. (The seminar was at a Tyson training center and it was there that I was also exposed to their mission statement; it being on public display). Allow me to quote Mr. Collins, “Enduring great companies don’t exist merely to deliver returns to shareholders. Indeed, in a truly great company, profits and cash flow become like blood and water to a healthy body: They are absolutely essential for life, but they are not the very point of life.”

That brings to mind then the question of why the Gentry School District exists? Does it exist for all students to become proficient on state achievement tests and benchmark exams or is that just a necessary component to the district’s continued life?

Understand clearly, the question is not why Arkansas public schools exist; they exist because the Constitution of the State of Arkansas gives them

existence. No, the question deals with the purpose of this district, its students, and the community it serves.

The Gentry Board of Education began its own leadership training at the close of last school year with the Leadership Academy. What follows is an early draft, one that is being refined, of the district administrators' and board members' "Core Beliefs". There are four current statements that state the following.

Opportunities must be provided for all teachers and all students to excel by maximizing their respective abilities. All stakeholders are responsible for student success. All student success must be objectively and quantifiably measured. A safe and healthy learning environment is conducive to learning.

In future articles I will elaborate on each of these and provide ways in which you, a stakeholder in our school, may become involved in the updating of our district's mission statement.