

Chalkboard

By

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For most of this school year it seems like the content of the *Chalkboard* has revolved around the issue of the Gentry School Board revisiting its Mission Statement. If you have been a reader, you are aware that the board has been working through this process with the Arkansas Leadership Academy.

The process began about a year ago when the board accepted my recommendation that our middle school “throw its name in the hat” to be considered as one of four schools to be chosen to participate in the Academy’s School Support Program. We were selected and our middle school began an intensive, guided self-study and training process that continues now and for the next two years.

Included in the Academy’s toolbox to improve our middle school’s academic performance was a process for board training which our board began last June. That process began with a session where the school administrators and board members eked out their joint core beliefs. Those four “belief” statements were **“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.”**

The process was an education in itself. I suspect that the yielding of self-will to the viewpoints and beliefs of others may have been as difficult for some as it was for me. I note that it is difficult to make decisions if you are always second-guessing the “rightness” of what you do. Yet, on the flip side of that coin is the often need to subjugate one’s own beliefs in order to seek out what is in the greatest good of the institutional group. As I have written to you previously, in deference to Jim Collins’ book, Good to Great, I just drive the bus; I do not own the bus, plan the route, or buy the fuel. What I think is rarely definitive. Ouch, and sorry to disappoint those who have thought otherwise, but I am just “hired help” and proud to serve in that capacity.

Somewhat in the same vein, the school board was not satisfied to limit a

subject with such a possible, far-reaching impact to just its own opinion and that of its administrators. Rather, they set out to hold community meetings and seek the patrons' and parents' of the district answer to the question, "*When it comes to the education of the students of Gentry, I (we) believe....*" Meetings were held out in the community in the five electoral zones of the district- at the Highfill Community Center, at the Springtown Pentecostal Church, at the Gentry Municipal Courtroom, at the Gentry Middle School, and at Cornerstone Baptist in Cherokee City. Two more additional meetings were held- one with community leaders and one "culmination" meeting where all participants of the first six meetings were invited back to compile the core beliefs. That happened and the compiled statements, the core beliefs of the district if you will, are: **"Opportunities must be provided for each teacher and student to excel by maximizing their respective abilities to assure students receive a strong foundation. All stakeholders are in partnership to encourage lifelong learning to promote. Each student's success must be objectively and quantifiably measured. We must provide a safe and healthy environment that is conducive to learning and also promotes the development of character and citizenship."**

I was surprised/not surprised to see how closely the board's first efforts matched those of the community they represent. From conversations held, I know the school board members felt affirmed by the process. Like any other elected governing body, they have a desire to represent the wishes of their constituents and that can be a difficult task if there are many conflicting needs.

Following is a "sneak peek" at the draft Vision Statement that has come into being at the board's last training session, being birthed from the district's Core Beliefs.

The Gentry School Board envisions a school district where:

- The stakeholders are involved in providing successful educational experiences for all students.
- Students and adults each maintain high achievement.
- Support for success is provided for all students and adults.
- The Learning Environment provided is healthy and safe both physically and emotionally for all students.
- Learning builds the capacity of students and adults to act on their own lives to better themselves now and in the future.

- Gentry School District is recognized as a leader in maintaining a system of quality educational experiences for all students.

The Vision Statement reflects what the School Board wants the future to “look like” for the Gentry School District.

If this draft statement becomes the final form for the board’s vision, then the final piece in this stage of the process becomes the revisiting of the district’s Mission Statement. As our consultant Chester Cummins explained to me, your vision statement is where you want to be; your mission statement details the process on how to get there.

On some continuum, somewhere in between where you want to be and where you “used to be” is where you really are. Let us call that place in time our “current reality”. (Smile...to be continued)