

Chalkboard

By

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Practice what you preach. Are you familiar with that expression? It is fairly self-explanatory. This year I have been “preaching” in the majority of the *Chalkboard* articles about the school board working to refine its core beliefs, its vision, and its mission. Monday night, on April 23rd, at its regular monthly meeting, the board officially adopted a set of core beliefs, a set of vision statements, and a mission statement. Because they appeared in the April 11, 2007, *Gentry Courier-Journal*, I will not list them again. If you cannot find that edition of the paper, look for core beliefs, vision statements, and mission statement on our school website at <http://www.gentrypioneers.com/>.

At that same meeting the board approved a new position, which I named “Dean of Student Affairs and Activities”. The following are a listing of the proposed duties of the position

- Monitor student attendance - make personal phone calls to parent(s)/guardian(s) when a student is absent (maintain documentation)
- Gather benchmark data from current school year and devise a system/process for "on-going" monitoring of attendance of individual students and their success or lack there of in the classroom and their performance on NRT/CRT assessments (Goal: work to reduce absenteeism and monitor academic achievement...using our local data.... does what the research says reflect our students/school...what can we do to make a difference)
- Schedule/attend conferences for classroom teachers when students reach the "HOT SEAT"
- Advocate for the "at-risk" students... monitoring attendance, maintaining communications with parent(s)/guardian(s) to build positive relationships between the home and the school, follow-up/monitor progress on AIP's, be the adult to "check-on" specific struggling students, etc.

- Act as liaison with community organizations that sponsor programs for Gentry students
- Maintain calendar/schedule of events in Carl Gymnasium, softball fields, baseball fields, practice fields, football stadium, soccer fields, and school buildings where community events and student activities occur—Oversee proper use of the above
- Other duties as assigned by the superintendent

So does any of that look familiar? No? Then you compare the above duties to some of the school board's, after having garnered community input, recent work.

Let us first look at the second statement of the school board's "new" Vision- *Students and staff each maintains high individual achievement. Support for success is provided for all students and staff.* Pay close attention to the word "each" in the first sentence and "all" in the second. See any relationship to the first four listed job duties? If the concern is for each student and all students to succeed in maintaining high individual achievement, is that concern being met with existing staff?

Vision statement #3- *The learning environment provided is healthy and safe both physically and emotionally for all students.* So what is a learning environment that is "emotionally safe" for all students? Does that mean that each student is to feel that he or she is as important as any other student? Does it mean that some non-authoritarian adult is on the lookout for students who may feel meaningless and isolated? Does there need to be a staff person who intervenes when a student seems to be going off on a wrong tangent? Are various existing staff members filling that role or are some students "falling through the crack"?

I could continue the comparisons but I would rather you, the reader, do that. You can do that, if you will, as good or better than I.

But let me do one more. Let's go back to the first example- *Students and staff each maintains high individual achievement.* This time, focus on the word "staff". We have some excellent staff members at Gentry. But the current reality is that each year higher and higher expectations are being made of their time and energy. Teachers are being asked to improve their skills, being taught to diagnose and prescribe intervention strategies for their students, being asked to not just teach content from a textbook but to analyze achievement data and build lessons from a

variety of resources, and so forth. If teachers are being asked to spend more time planning and collaborating with each other for the academic benefit of the students they serve, then someone else needs to have both the time and assigned responsibility of taking care of other equally important but ancillary concerns.

Let us go back now to “practice what you preach”. For the first time in 32 years a school board did not renew my contract of employment. The contract I currently have expires on June 30, 2008, a year from this June 30th. Normally, it would have been extended for another year in advance to June 30, 2009.

After a rather long two-hour discussion to perform my summative evaluation, held in an executive session of which I was not (and never am) a part, the board called me back in and basically said, “We don’t have any quantitative data on which to base your renewal or non-renewal.”

Apparently the board has been paying attention to the “preaching” of their superintendent and Arkansas Leadership Academy consultants about the need to measure progress with a review of facts rather than feelings. Call it a corollary to Core Belief # 3, which says, *Each student’s success must be objectively and quantifiably measured.* It seems that they felt, as my Grandmother Inez might have said, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

What the board said additionally was, “We want to move the superintendent’s evaluation to next January from this April. We want you to gather performance indicators like test scores, drop-out rates, financial data, numbers of suspensions and expulsions, retention of good staff; dismissal of those unwilling or unable to do satisfactory work, and so on and so on... You’re our CEO that supposed to be leading the district. We do not want to hire you back until we have facts that indicate you are leading us in the right direction. We think you are doing a good job, but we want to know that.” Well, those may not have been their exact words but that is close enough for government work.

There was no room for debate; you have to practice what you preach.