

Ralph Teran responses to OSD questions presented by Mr.George Schiro 05.15.2011

**Q3b) What plan of action would you take to implement Florida's Race to the Top initiatives successfully?**

In any question related to what I would do regarding multiple district operational areas, my initial answer will be that first I have to immerse myself in the mission, vision, goals, strategies and action plans in place in the district. If selected, I would implement a 90 day entry plan which would allow me to then collaboratively proceed strategically to execute action plans and determine results. With that being said and specifically to Race to the Top (RT3) - I reviewed the Osceola School District (OSD) Project Application to the Florida Department of Education for RT3 Approval and it seems like a comprehensive well thought out plan of action. Stakeholders in OSD spent a lot of time, energy, and effort developing, and implementing the plan, so I would join in on the implementation of the plan make adjustments and/or modifications as needed in concert with the stakeholders who designed the plan and have responsibility for oversight.

**Q9) Will you allow teachers to provide input and have a voice into matters that concern them?**

Yes.

**How will you go about this?**

I would personally model it through directly listening to teacher concerns, counsel, and advice, and setting that expectation for all levels of district administration to do likewise. I assume there are processes in place in OSD in concert with the teacher representative group for teacher input on issues that concern them, and/or district teacher advisory groups. We cannot make consistent robust progress in student achievement without teacher input and leadership.

**How will you determine if there are legitimate issues and concerns at the teacher/staff level?**

So much is contingent on the issue(s), the severity/nature of the issue(s), but ultimately, you gather information, through various methods, determine findings and determine action plans to address the concerns and then you monitor to determine the effectiveness of the response.

**Q10) How will you handle a difficult parent? Define "difficult parent".**

**How will you handle five individual personalities on the School Board?**

Please allow me to reframe this to how I would “respond” when approached by and/or attempting to attend to the needs of parent with a serious concern/complaint regarding our words/actions. My hope is to first and foremost be respectful, a listener and attempt to lower conflict so that resolution/repair can take place. With this in mind, there are several key frames of reference that I find helpful as I attempt to resolved potential conflicts with parent stakeholders. First and foremost, "It's Their Kids, Their Schools, Their Taxes (Mike Moses)" and "I am not self-employed, I work for them." In my years in this work I find that there is usually at least a kernel of truth in most criticisms of our work, and some learning from even “difficult” critiques of our words/actions which can inform our practice, so we can get better and better each day. By stating this I by no

means imply that I have this mastered. I'm still growing and learning in my effectiveness in dealing with a complaint.

**How will I handle five individual personalities on the School Board?**

I'm not sure the older I get that I really "handle" anyone. I have enough to do handling myself. But again, the same applies, respect and listening. I think it is a tremendous asset to have Board members, each with their own talents/dispositions/skills and experiences, which bring a diverse perspective to a School Board. Probably a general principal that I try to practice in serving the Board is to keep the Board informed and to avoid "surprises" at all costs. Generally, I find that Kindergarteners love surprise parties, but boards and superintendents hate them. I've been fortunate to work with Board Members who call me when they have concerns about an issue or an agenda item, give me a heads up so I can address the item prior to the meeting, provide more information, or if need be pull the item so we can do more homework. Generally, you can't communicate too much.

**Q14) How do fine arts and performing arts fit in to your overall plan for a school district?**

My wife and I just saw the three panels of Monet's "Water Lilies" at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Kansas City has one on permanent exhibit. The other panels are in St. Louis and Cleveland. What an incredible sight to see them all at the same time, with photographs and film of his extensive lily ponds shaped outside of Paris fashioned after Japanese Gardens. The arts are pivotal to a good education and to a thriving life. The Arts humanize us. I was fortunate to have outstanding teachers and principals who valued fine and performing arts. A principal taught me how to mix/blend water colors in fifth grade and I won a national art contest - I was "August of 1966" in the Northwestern Life Insurance Children's Art Calendar. I am pleased that we have outstanding band programs in GC4, an art teacher in every elementary school, and collaboration to bring arts to our schools through the Kansas City Arts Partners Program. I am aware that OSD has outstanding fine arts and performing arts with magnet programs for such. I certainly would do all I could to continue to work with all partners to nurture and enhance such programs.

**Q16) Discuss the experiences you have had in working with the special needs of exceptional education students and language enriched pupils (LEP). What initiatives have you implemented in your current district to meet the special needs of exceptional education students and limited English speaking students? What were the results?**

I have extensive experience since my primary Major and Masters Program was in Communication Disorders. I worked extensively with language and speech impaired children and adults in both institutional, hospital, and public school settings. My master's thesis was an adaptation of an experimental design study on a strategy used with language impaired (Aphasic) adults at Boston University/Hospital called Melodic Intonation Therapy, which exaggerated (in musical notation) normal language intonation patterns to assist brain damaged adults to "fire up" the right brain hemisphere. My thesis professor and I adapted the concept to use with ESOL students at Wichita State

University. We proposed that the perception of “foreign accent” is typically more characterized by subject’s intonation as opposed to articulation. We did find a moderate treatment effect, presented and published some of our findings.

I’ve worked as an administrator overseeing special education programs at elementary, middle, and high school levels over my career. In the 1990’s at Wichita North High Schools, we were probably the state’s (Kansas) leading site in implementing class within a class special education programming. In GC4, we have made significant efforts towards inclusion of special needs children, providing extensive services in our district schools and decreasing the number of students in special schools. The results were that more special needs students were served in our own schools and we significantly decreased out of district placements costs.

**Q17) Discuss the progress the schools in your district have made in the area of student achievement. What role did you play in these accomplishments?**

I covered a synopsis of student achievement progress in both Wichita Public Schools and Grandview C-4 Schools in my application letter. Generally, in Missouri, the Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) identifies 14 Performance Standards with districts having to achieve at least 9 standards to sustain accreditation. When I arrived five years ago, GC4 was at 7/14, which if progress had not occurred, would have potentially resulted in provisional accreditation. We worked hard and are currently at 11/14 and believe we are in striking distance of 14/14. My role in increasing student achievement is to do all I can to keep the focus on monitoring teaching and learning with a laser-like focus on results, and doing all I can to remove barriers to teaching and learning, so that there is a clear unity of purpose on increasing student achievement, approaching the work through collaborative leadership and shared commitment. I think my role is to provide both pressure and support on all stakeholders, including myself, to increase student achievement. Ultimate, I am a cheerleader supporting students and teachers, encouraging parents and the community to join in.

**Q19) Discuss the experience you have in motivating a diverse staff and student body.**

I have worked in diverse student and staff setting the majority of my professional life. I think I ultimately motivate a diverse staff and student body by being genuinely excited and thankful for the opportunity to live, work, and learn in diversity. It is a so much fun and a real charge and a tremendous asset and I always choose it. I sincerely hope I convey that consistently. I think you take it further by respecting diversity, celebrating it, and learning from what it offers.

**Q20) How has diversity impacted your leadership in your current workplace?**

I think I answered that partially above. Each year that passes I am grateful for the many blessing in my life and working in diversity is one of the major ones. Living, learning, and working in diversity is exciting and fun! and I believe it shows in my work.

**What role have you played in celebrating diversity?**

I have supported celebrating diversity as an ongoing normal aspect of our teaching and learning, and I have supported special programs and events. I feel comfortable in diversity and even dealing with difficulties that sometimes emerge because of our living together in diversity and needing to broaden our perspectives and understandings, and examine our hearts. I don't shy away from it. I am transparent, in my own growth appreciating and valuing differences.

**Q23) What is your position on privatization of County School Board jobs?**

I think we have to deliver the best value to our customers, the taxpayers. I am open to looking at alternatives to the way we operate all aspects of the school district (administrative, certified, classified, instructional and operational programs). The economic downturn impacted the Grandview C-4 school district deeply and our food service program needed improvements. We studied various options and decided to enter into services with a private provider. There were legitimate concerns from food service employees. In our particular case, district employees would remain district employees, but new personnel would be private company employees. We have increased efficiencies and run a small profit which goes back into the program for needed improvements. So far, it is working for us. I am also aware of districts where it doesn't work well. So much of it is situational. We also considered doing the same with custodial/maintenance operations, but efficiencies implemented by the custodial and maintenance departments, and change in leadership, have been very positive and I do not believe a contracted service could trump what they are currently doing.

**Q25) What sort of relationship do you envision between employer and Union at the School Board?**

I envision a totally mutually supportive and collaborative relationship between the employer, the union(s) and the School Board. We cannot make and sustain student achievement gains necessary for our students to live, thrive, and compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy without unity of purpose, team building, and commitment to task between these three entities. If I progress as a candidate for OSD superintendent and I don't have a gut feeling that this can occur, I would not accept the position if offered. By the way, this is very hard work to do. It is not for the fainthearted. It takes strong egos (not big egos) to come to win/win solutions and understandings to benefit our students.

**Q32) What do you know about this community and school district?**

I know this community values diversity, celebrates it, and also values and nurtures being a close-knit community. I sense there is a significant amount of pride in this community. I have looked at significant district information regarding achievement and student populations. I know that the economy, which has been very hard all over the country, has hit this community, with major impacts on the hospitality industry in the metro area and home foreclosures.

I think collaborative working relationships are occurring in the district because student performance factors have steadily improved. I am extremely pleased that collective

bargaining appears to be done in a collaborative mode. I think there is work to be done and improvements to be made and I believe a willingness to do the heavy lifting. I think the community is looking for a superintendent who will join that work, lead that work, provide balanced pressure/support in a collaborative manner, and that is why I am interested in the position.

**Q42) How would you organize this district's custodial services?**

I don't know enough about how district custodial services are organized so I would need to familiarize myself with custodial operations during my 90 day entry plan before I can, in collaboration with others, address the question. I have tremendous respect for custodial employees. They have a direct and powerful impact on student achievement. If the facilities are not well maintained and clean – students cannot learn. Custodians must be supported by the administration, teachers, and students so they can be effective in their work.

**Q43) How would you operate the food service program?**

Again, a similar response to Q42, I would need to learn more during my 90 day entry plan if selected. Cafeteria workers are extremely important to the effective operation of schools. I've seen countless cafeteria ladies (yes, in my district few men!) who provide invaluable assistance to students, making them feel comfortable and secure in school.

**Should the food service program operate in the black?**

The food service program should not operate in the red, so yes, at least some in the black, to assist/support investments and improvements to the program. I also want to emphasize since I used the example of contracted services for food services in Grandview, that I would not be pre-disposed to pursue that elsewhere. It is situational, and I have learned, sometimes the hard way, to not go looking to fix something that is not broke.

**Q49) As an example, let's assume that you are not familiar with the "Race to the Top" standards for the state of Florida. How do you get up-to-speed quickly on such unfamiliar policies implemented in other states? Describe the method that you would use.**

I have already done some review of Florida RT3, and my sense is that while some states received the funding (Florida) and some did not (Missouri) that there is significant alignment in the focus areas across states. I think more and more, across the nation we are all dealing with a similar dashboard, for example the Common Core State Standards Initiative (also strongly championed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Education Trust). I think you are correct in assuming there are still significant differences from state to state; I certainly experienced the significant differences having spent most of my career working in Kansas and moving to Missouri (accreditation standards, school financing taxation, and other areas). Generally as a result of No Child Left Behind, RT3 and other national efforts, we are probably experiencing more commonality than ever.

**Q50) What do you think about the Parent Internet Viewer (PIV) used in the Osceola County School District?**

I am not familiar with the specific program in OSD. Assuming that it includes typical components of such portals I believe they are helpful but the key is keeping the information fresh and updated.

**What have you used in the past to keep parents informed of their children's grade status?**

These types of portals were used in the Wichita High Schools when I was there (up to 2006) and I was familiar with them both in my capacity as Assistant Superintendent of High Schools and having my own children in Wichita High Schools during that time. In GC4 we have a Parent Portal/link which provides grades, assignments, schedules, transcripts and additional information. From time to time parents express concern that some schools and/or teachers do better than others in keeping the assignments, grades and other pertinent information up to date. We held community input meetings at all schools in November and December of this school year and the parent portal was identified as both strength and a weakness for these reasons. Our Superintendent Community Advisory Committee is targeting improvements in all our communications efforts which includes keeping the portal updated as well as other parent communication processes.

**What is the maximum amount of time that should elapse between the determination of an assignment or test grade and when it is posted online for parents to see? Please elaborate.**

Not fully knowing the degree of standardized procedures on grading in OSD, the pacing guide, the types of grading process (i.e., benchmarking, mastery) it is difficult for me to answer the question, but generally, across most grades and disciplines, grades on most assignments and tests should be updated at least weekly. However, a communication arts/English teacher with upward of 150 student load who assigns an appropriately challenging essay task would be reasonable in getting the essays graded with meaningful markings and comments in two weeks. Since we want to encourage writing (congratulations to OSD on good FCAT writing progress this year) and more complex projects, a longer time between assignment completion and grading is reasonable. A great deal also depends on the pacing guides used in the district. Ultimately whatever parent link or VIP is used must be backed up with the supreme power of the teacher phone call home to the parents. Teachers can play a big part by engaging parents during parent teacher conferencing in advocating for frequent and effective use of the systems. It is discouraging to teachers to do all the work of entering the data and have few parents access it. It is a two-way street. We all need to work on it. One of our new Board members in Grandview is retiring as a teacher and in his district they require all teachers to call home at least twice with something engaging and/or positive to convey about each student prior to having to make a disciplinary and/or compliance call. I like that.

**Q51) How would you verify on a day-to-day basis that your policies and procedures are being properly implemented?**

I depend on my direct reports, monitoring their respective areas of responsibility, to keep me informed. It is essential to have quality people who are transparent and have access

to the superintendent, willing to bear both good and bad news. I also try to make myself available to all district employees and stakeholders so that I hear information directly. Formal feedback formats such as employee, student, parent and community advisory groups are important mechanisms to monitor fidelity to policies and procedures. I enjoy visiting schools and departments to increase access and get a sense of how things are working.

**For example, how do you know if teachers are handing out the questions and answers to midterm or final exams?**

Unfortunately, school/district personnel make mistakes. Usually, in something like the example above in which case information makes it way to the proper channels and then it is address. I can also think of times when unfortunately improper actions or lack of actions goes undiscovered, then it emerges and it has to be dealt with, reconciled, and repaired. So you have to remain vigilant to infractions to prevent them and/or repair quickly.

**Q52) What plans would you implement to eliminate sugary products in school cafeterias and vending machines?**

There are increasing statutory and compliance regulations to sugary products in school cafeterias and vending machines. It has changed significantly in the last five years and I welcome it. Our food service program has steadily offered healthier choices and our students enjoy them. I think I was initially slow to welcome some of these changes years ago because so much of our student activities funding for sports and extra-curricular programs were dependent on vending machines. I regret being slow, and I am now a strong advocate of getting away from junk foods, for students, staff, including me.

**Q53) Given the state school systems are currently face with regarding bullying on campus as well as off campus, briefly mention:**

**a. What measure(s) have you implemented in dealing with this issue in your current position?**

We have provided training for all staffs on promoting positive student behaviors and identifying bullying and all forms of harassment, dealing with it in a timely manner and with proper consequences. Training and monitoring must be frequent and ongoing.

**b. What measure(s) you will implement across the school system to ensure the safety of all children?**

The Board of Education must have clear policies on bullying and all forms of harassment and the policies must be enforced by all school staffs.

**c. How will you ensure that this method is implemented in all schools?**

I would expect all principals to know and adhere to Board policy in all practices to eliminate bullying and all forms of harassment and would deal appropriately with non-compliance by principals and/or other school staffs.

**Q54) What method(s) do you have in mind to deal with out-of-zone students?**

I need to become acquainted with policies addressing out-of zone students and determine what if any issues are occurring regarding non-compliance. In the Grandview District,

as in most districts in Missouri, district residency has to be closely monitored and enforced. In the Wichita Public Schools, students attending schools out of their school assigned boundary had to be monitored. It is not easy to do so with mobility factors and child-care needs of families but it has to be constantly monitored.

**Q55) What will you do to recruit minority teachers to Osceola County?**

I need to become familiar with current efforts in the district and their success. The Wichita Public Schools has had a very successful Grow Your Own Teacher (GYOT) which identified students interested in becoming teachers in high school and/or their first years in college and provided financial assistance with finishing a teaching degree and it was expected that the candidates would teach in the district. The Grandview District has an effective cadet teacher program for high school students who assist teachers in the elementary schools. Students have a great opportunity to determine whether teaching is a good fit for them. Most likely OSD has some current programs with these features, if not; I would be interested in exploring it. I think the best candidates for teachers in Osceola County are attending Osceola County Schools at this time.

Ultimately, we have to be good positive role models for the teaching profession. Currently, there is a lot of bashing of public education and frankly of teachers. I think its okay to put pressure on all of us in the system to stretch and improve our practices and results, but it is just as important to provide support. The best way to recruit new teachers is to keep our current teachers growing and thriving, pressuring for even greater results, but coming alongside and supporting. Because I certainly would not be writing this today save for my teachers.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to these questions.