



Superintendent
Tyler Ream, Ed. D
324-2001

Business Manager
Janelle Mickelson
324-2040

Board of Trustees Special Session
Ray Bjork Center (1600 8th Ave) and via Microsoft Teams
Wednesday, February 10, 2021
9:30am

MINUTES

ATTENDANCE: Present unless otherwise noted

Luke Muszkiewicz, Board Chair
Siobhan Hathhorn, Board Vice Chair
Terry Beaver, Trustee, (excused for 1st interview, present for 2nd)
John McEwen, Trustee
Sarah Sullivan, Trustee
Jennifer McKee, Trustee
Libby Goldes, Trustee
Jennifer Walsh, Board Member

I. CALL TO ORDER/ PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Luke Muszkiewicz called the meeting to order at 9:30 am and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

II. REVIEW OF AGENDA

No Change

III. NEW BUSINESS

A. ITEM FOR INFORMATION

1. Superintendent Search – Semifinalist Interviews

Jim Wagner

Jim Wagner is from Minnesota originally. He is currently living and working in Wyoming. He started his career as a science teacher in Minnesota in a school district of about 12,000. After 11 years teaching, he spent 7 years as a principal in 2 different districts in the same state. He worked with a significant population of Hispanic and Native American students in his time as principal. He then took a superintendent job north of the Twin Cities and spent 4 years there. During his time there, he dealt with a failed building bond, that was then turned around when a local company donated a building to the district. Following his times there, he took a superintendent job in Wyoming, where he is currently. He has been there for 3 years. He is looking for a larger district in an area with more opportunities for his family. He was born and raised on a farm. In school, he was an athlete, in band, choir and drama. He tries to always look through the eyes of the kids to determine their needs.

Q: What do you see as the strengths of our district and what is compelling about serving as superintendent in Helena?

A: The community size provides opportunities for the school to work with the community. It gives businesses an opportunity to partner with the schools in both the town and the state. The school district seems to function with the community and not independent of it, which makes it stronger. Smaller class sizes are available. Its important for the schools to provide for all levels and the possibilities in Helena are endless.

Q: The impact of COVID-19 on public education cannot be overstated. What have you learned from your leadership during a pandemic? What must we consider as we move forward as a public school district?

A: Politics can muddy things way too much and make it frustrating in navigating. Mr. Wagner has an undergraduate degree in Biology, so he studied microbiology and genetics. He has a thorough understanding of how viruses spread and how they work. Its important to look at the science in situations like this. In Wyoming, his district has been fully open since September. They have pushed the mask mandate and social distancing. The schools have always done the contract tracing. They learned that when they followed protocol closely, they were not spreading the virus in large numbers. They have upped the cleaning and have done fogging. They can see and predict the spikes at holidays. They did learn that they were not as prepared for online learning as they thought they were. They implemented smart start and stuck to it and continued to watch the science the whole way.

Q: Aside from COVID-19, what do you see as the most significant issue facing the Helena public schools? Can you describe relevant experience and how you will address these issues?

A: There is a significant achievement gap for Helena students. Data shows a higher level of poverty and he would work to bridge the gap. Teachers are as much

responsible as kids are for this issue. He would evaluate who are the stronger teachers and who are the ones who may need improvement and not be afraid to have those conversations. He would take part in observations and walk throughs at each school and take notes and give feedback. He would look for student engagement. He would make sure the focus is on the students and find out what is working and change what is not working. He would also look for struggles in minorities.

Q: A successful public school district requires mutual respect and shared vision between the Board and the Superintendent including a clear understanding of each other's roles. How do you foster a healthy, collaborative relationship with your Board to further the strategic priorities of your district?

A: Its important to have a good solid Strategic Plan that both are involved in. Discussions need to be had at the very beginning of the relationship to establish trust and understanding. Make sure protocols are followed in speaking to staff and make sure that the plan in place is clear and concise.

Q: What aspects of our current Strategic Plan do you feel are most important? How do you ensure progress towards district priorities while remaining open to uncertainty and change in the future?

A: The most important aspects are the direction and looking at how that impacts the students at the individual level. There is a good step by step process. Its important to make sure that it is a moving document. It must be re-evaluated monthly and yearly to change things and make it more successful. It must always stay student focused.

Q: Unfortunately, sometimes staff must be let go due to performance issues, enrollment declines, or it becomes clear that a staff person is not in the right role and needs to be transferred. How do you go about making those difficult decisions and how would you rate your ability to do so?

A: Its something he has had to do throughout his career. If it is a budget cut, that is easier because you can strictly go off that and its an easy explanation. If its performance based, you have to make sure you have the data to back up your words. Not performing well is a day wasted, and a day lost and its not acceptable. He would approach this in looking at if he would be comfortable having his own kids in that classroom. If not, then he does not want other kids under that person either. He believes he does it well, but it does tear him up a bit because he knows its peoples lives that are affected. He is willing to do the hard things and he would always make sure to have data to back it up and cover the district.

Q: Describe experience with labor unions representing teachers and support staff. What is your approach to finding consensus through collective bargaining?

A: The last 7 years as a superintendent, he negotiated contracts. Minnesota is a heavy labor union state. Wyoming is not as well organized. He would meet with the Board and be clear on finances. He would use comparisons with other similar districts size

wise to be competitive. He would also find ways to recognize educators and make them feel appreciated if finances were not there.

Q: What is your communication style and how do you build strong relationships with students, parents, staff, community members and media organizations? How will you handle these responsibilities in order to maintain trust, understanding and engagement within the district and community?

A: First, he would determine if what he has to say is informational or a discussion. If it is a discussion that needs to be had, he would always have it in person. He would then figure out how the community wants to be communicated with. In Minnesota, he found a company that helped with the webpage and app technology. He would work to build trust and talk to people and take the time to meet with people. He would give more people access through technology. He would always keep the Board in the loop and make sure to be approachable and accessible. He would go to people instead of waiting for them to always come to him. He would work to make sure that everyone involved in a situation is always notified and up to date.

Q: What experience do you have preparing all the students for the range of opportunities that await them after graduation? How will you approach college readiness, career and technical education, internships and apprenticeships?

A: He would first look at what is offered. Look at adding more college prep classes and start apprenticeship programs with local companies. They can train the kids and have an opportunity to see who may be able to come on with the company after high school. Expand the opportunities of welding, culinary arts, meat processing, ranching, etc. He would talk to local business and get them to donate and partner with the schools.

Q: Nationwide and within our district, the number of students that identify as special education needs is greatly increased. We have also seen an increase in students with severe behavioral problems and mental health needs. What is your experience with this challenging issue and what successful strategies have you been able to employ given existing budget constraints?

A: Its not necessarily that there are more kids with these issues, its that we have become better at identifying these kids and their needs. He has sat in on IEP meetings. Its important to break the stigma and make it known that this is not a life sentence. Look at what we can provide and possibly take a kid on an IEP and change that to a 504 plan. Help staff understand the difference between IEP's and 504's. Help staff be able to better identify students needs. There are financial constraints, but he would look to gain partnership with other entities and provide more alternative learning like the alternative high school in his current district in Wyoming.

Q: Our district provides several educational programs focused on specific student populations: Elementary Montessori, alternative High School, High

School dropout recovery programs and a gifted and talented program. How would you evaluate and administer such programs and what role they play in fulfilling our mission to challenge and empower each student to maximize individual potential?

A: He would make sure to set short term and long-term goals and determine the success rate of both. Data should show what is working and what is not. Not all models work for every person. He would work to see what is working and tweak what is not to make sure to give kids lifelong habits to be successful.

Q: East Helena Public Schools began admitting high school students in the Fall of 2019 and opened the new building in the Fall of 2020. Do you have experience with declining enrollment and how should we plan for needed investment in our high schools?

A: In his first superintendent job, the districts had been experiencing falling enrollment for 12 years when he started, and they were in debt. They hired a company to promote and highlight the things the district was doing. They surveyed the parents and identified the top 5 issues that were contributing to the enrollment decline and then corrected them. Once corrected, they sent that info out to parents. They were able to increase the enrollment by 22% in the 4 years he was there. He would be ready to talk to the mayor, city council and businesses. He would partner with them to help in getting new people to move to the area.

Q: Like many districts within Montana, revenues are often insufficient to meet rising personnel and facilities costs. We have utilized budget forecasting to build a shared understanding of our financial situation, but what additional steps should we take to help close the revenue gap?

A: Look at the birth rates, the people moving in and out of the community and look at what can be done to bring more revenue to the area. Partner with local and state governments to provide tax breaks for business moving in. The district needs to always have a working partnership with city and county and make sure there is always dialog going back and forth.

Q: What experience do you have with developing and implementing long range facilities planning, including boundary adjustments, land acquisition, new construction and maintenance. Please explain how you have involved the community in these discussions and decisions.

A: In Minnesota, the building bond failed, but the process involved discussions with the city and having public meetings with parents. He had to look at the long-term impacts to the community and have answers to any issues. He looked at land availability, funding and revenues. Its important to make sure that the planning is done with anyone who is involved or may be impacted. He has also had experience meeting with Legislators and State Reps. He has seen what works and what does not.

Q: Leading a school district is difficult and an all-consuming job, especially during a pandemic. How do you handle the stress involved with your work? How will you maintain a sustainable work/life balance while successfully running our school system?

A: He has a lot of faith in family and spiritual faith. He gets up very early to workout every morning. He is usually the only one in the gym and he uses this time to collect his thoughts and take care of himself physically. He is currently working on his doctorate. His wife and his children are his stress relief. He tries not to take himself too seriously, but he works hard to always be prepared. He is also a pilot and that hobby gives him something else to also focus on.

Q: Is there anything in your background that could come out in this process that you would like to discuss now?

A: Nothing.

Q: Any questions for the Board?

Q: What does the Board do for a successful Superintendent relationship?

A: Revise and adapt the Strategic Plan. This is the game plan to measure success. Make sure that everyone is on the same page. Make sure that everyone understands and agrees on their rolls upfront. Its also important to the Board that the Superintendent take time off and have a balance with personal life. Informal conversations and an open-door policy are also helpful.

Q: What is the community's mood towards the District?

A: Generally speaking, the community is very supportive. People appreciate the work that is being done. Typically, they pass and support levies. Recently a large bond was passed with overwhelming support. In March, the school went online. In September, the district started back in a hybrid model. It kind of came to a head at the last meeting. The public spoke and the Board chose to phase up to a 4 day a week model. The community seems to be split mostly down the middle on this. We are confident the community will rally.

Thank you.

RECESS

Joe Koch

Joe Koch is in his 19th year of education. He began his career as a Special Education teacher in Milwaukee schools at the High School level, then went on to teach in Waukesha County and Port Washington schools, both in Wisconsin. After 5 years in Port Washington, we moved on to the Denmark District, also in Wisconsin. Here he split time between being the High School Principal and the Director of Pupil Services.

He moved from there to a split District situation south of Green Bay as the Director of Pupil Services for 2 years. He is currently in Waukesha as the Deputy Superintendent. He has been there for 7 years.

Q: What do you see as the strengths of our district and what is compelling about serving as superintendent in Helena?

A: The strengths are in the recent bond work and the commitment the community has made which shows a sign of support. The academic levels the students are achieving show that Helena is attracting and retaining high quality staff. The opportunity to be in a larger school district in the state capital and to be in such a beautiful place is what draws him to this position. His career has focused on districts with declining enrollment and he has worked through building projects and restructuring of districts and that is a need for the Helena school district.

Q: The impact of COVID-19 on public education cannot be overstated. What have you learned from your leadership during a pandemic? What must we consider as we move forward as a public school district?

A: It has had a remarkable impact. He has learned how to more accurately diagnose obstacles. He led his current school districts re-opening plan. They looked at the impact's quarantines would have and at what supplies and supports were in place to reopen. They looked at what impacts the hybrid and online learning were having on student achievement. In many instances across the board, students' number of F's were doubling and tripling. They had to look at what could be done from that point and further into the summer program to help kids get back on track. Its important to have a plan to help kids get reasonably caught up. Subjects like math took a bigger hit because its hard for families at home to help with that subject. Areas like reading were easier to stay up with. They deployed social workers to connect with students during the shutdown and hybrid model. They are now working on getting more mental health services.

Q: Aside from COVID-19, what do you see as the most significant issue facing the Helena public schools? Can you describe relevant experience and how you will address these issues?

A: The most pressing issue is probably declining enrollment at the High School level and the impact it will have on the budget in the 3–5-year planning. He has experience with the declining enrollment. He would look at priorities and align the staff and funding. In his current district they have a virtual charter school that is very successful. He would look at what would draw students into the district. Dual language programs have also been successful.

Q: A successful public school district requires mutual respect and shared vision between the Board and the Superintendent including a clear understanding of

each other's roles. How do you foster a healthy, collaborative relationship with your Board to further the strategic priorities of your district?

A: His door is always open. He believes in communication. Some things are easier communicated than others. He would spend a lot of time making sure that everyone knows what is going on and why. He would establish priorities and make sure everyone is on the same page with the strategic priorities. Its essential to establish everyone's role and to also make sure no one is ever surprised by anything.

Q: What aspects of our current Strategic Plan do you feel are most important? How do you ensure progress towards district priorities while remaining open to uncertainty and change in the future?

A: The priorities that stand out are the ones pertaining to post-secondary options. That should encompass all we do from the start of school to the finish at graduation. In going through the plan, he feels it does not establish a lot of metrics to measure success. So, he would look at how to measure that success and what opportunities there are for the future.

Q: Unfortunately, sometimes staff must be let go due to performance issues, enrollment declines, or it becomes clear that a staff person is not in the right role and needs to be transferred. How do you go about making those difficult decisions and how would you rate your ability to do so?

A: If the reason for letting someone go was budgetary, he would fall back on the handbook and collective bargaining. The rules and matrix would dictate that. He feels its important to always be clear about what is expected and when what is expected is not met, dismissal is necessary. He has been effective in getting rid of staff that fall short. He has had to do it with principals, central office and teachers. He likes to give them an opportunity to grow but when they do not, it is time to move on. It should be no surprise if what is expected is clear from the beginning. Students should always be central to that decision.

Q: Describe experience with labor unions representing teachers and support staff. What is your approach to finding consensus through collective bargaining?

A: He has experience with partnering with teachers' unions along the way. Communication on the front end is essential. How are we currently being funded would be the first thing to look at. What are the priorities and what does the 3/5/10 year plan look like for the district? There needs to be balance between attracting and retaining, but it is also important to see if raises will butt up against teacher reduction issues.

Q: What is your communication style and how do you build strong relationships with students, parents, staff, community members and media organizations? How will you handle these responsibilities in order to maintain trust, understanding and engagement within the district and community?

A: He prefers to do things face to face; however, he does also have strong written communication skills. Its important to be responsive to the media and proactive when its possible. He tries to always respond in a timely manner. Make sure staff understands why we are doing what we are doing. Show the community members the benefits. Time spent is an investment. Its being true to your work. Its always necessary to be clear about what you can and cannot do. Communicating progress towards goals is also important. He would make himself available and work to gain trust and maintain a servant leadership.

Q: What experience do you have preparing all the students for the range of opportunities that await them after graduation? How will you approach college readiness, career and technical education, internships and apprenticeships?

A: As far as internships and apprenticeships go, he would work with high school counselors and administrators to make sure they are in contact with the local tech colleges and businesses to employ and give real life experience. He would work from K-12 to make sure kids can have the knowledge needed to get into college. He would work towards access to college experiences before kids ever graduate from High School. His Master Thesis in college was on Transitioning Students with Disabilities from High School to Post Secondary Careers in the Trades. He learned there is a skill gap in what we experience and what kids perceive life will be. Kids need to get to graduation with a key to unlock any door they chose. They should not be pushed into something they are not ready for or interested in. Its also important to prioritize those things within the budget constraints. Its should be part of the Strategic Plan.

Q: Nationwide and within our district, the number of students that identify as special education needs is greatly increased. We have also seen an increase in students with severe behavioral problems and mental health needs. What is your experience with this challenging issue and what successful strategies have you been able to employ given existing budget constraints?

A: We need to make sure that the district has a comprehensive social and emotional learning program in place to teach skills. Technology sometimes causes issues. He would partner with families to support the kids. He feels that the county would benefit from providing more early learning programs for preacademic success. A lack of motivation leads to a disengagement and that leads to troubling behaviors. We need to adapt to be relevant and engage. He would like to see an increase in social workers and counselors and psychologists. He would partner with the counties for more outreach.

Q: Our district provides several educational programs focused on specific student populations: Elementary Montessori, alternative High School, High School dropout recovery programs and a gifted and talented program. How would you evaluate and administer such programs and what role they play in

fulfilling our mission to challenge and empower each student to maximize individual potential?

A: All students have different learning styles. Some are prepared much earlier to be able to tackle and handle more difficult academic tasks. To gauge the effectiveness of your programs, you have to spend time with the teachers, students and parents, and make sure they are truly meeting the needs of the students. Are the programs we have challenging them enough? Are they high in reading but low in math? Kids will engage at different times in their academic life. We need to make sure we have programs at every level to support the learner when the learner is ready. A diploma should be a sense of accomplishment and should mean something.

Q: East Helena Public Schools began admitting high school students in the Fall of 2019 and opened the new building in the Fall of 2020. Do you have experience with declining enrollment and how should we plan for needed investment in our high schools?

A: He has a lot of experience with this issue. One way to start to plan is to do a population study to see what the future impact will be. Where he is currently, they run a 2-, 3- and 5-year average for enrollment and it helps to reasonably predict future numbers. Currently, Helena has 2 high schools, and the numbers are decreasing. Would Helena possibly need to close a high school and with that there are new needs. Would one building need an addition to accommodate all the students? He would put time into the community to find out what they would support and what is appropriate. An addition would then need a bond and he has experience with that as well.

Q: Like many districts within Montana, revenues are often insufficient to meet rising personnel and facilities costs. We have utilized budget forecasting to build a shared understanding of our financial situation, but what additional steps should we take to help close the revenue gap?

A: We would look at the possibility of levying extra money. We would need to forecast out far enough into the future and look at what the compensation model looks like. Are there constraints in place to prevent from touching retirements and benefits? Some grant work can cover a few costs. It's important to make sure the right people are doing the right jobs. Are there things we are doing now that we will not need to do in the future? Also, this should be part of the Strategic Plan.

Q: What experience do you have with developing and implementing long range facilities planning, including boundary adjustments, land acquisition, new construction and maintenance. Please explain how you have involved the community in these discussions and decisions.

A: He has experience with long range facilities plans and working with architects and engineers to go through the building and look at high ticket items like roofs, parking lots and boiler systems. He would survey the community to see what things they would support. In a past job, they looked at putting together a new Middle School that

would cost taxpayers \$110,000,000. They surveyed and found the community would not support that, but they would support upgrades to current buildings and when they did that, it passed with a 2/3 vote of support. 2 years ago, he had to close an elementary school and they had to plan for redistribution of students and with that, boundary line changes. He would make sure to be available to answer questions to those that are affected by the changes. He says to count swing sets and not houses to predict your future numbers.

Q: Leading a school district is difficult and an all-consuming job, especially during a pandemic. How do you handle the stress involved with your work? How will you maintain a sustainable work/life balance while successfully running our school system?

A: He wakes up at 3:30 am most mornings to have coffee and check emails and follows that with a workout. He does all of this before his family wakes up. He has 4 small children that he wants to be present for. It is important to develop good working relationships with those around him to share the burden. He believes that everyone can share the load if they do the jobs assigned to them. He tries to utilize time well. He listens to music and podcasts on his way to work. He also likes to hunt and fish and spend time outdoors.

Q: Is there anything in your background that could come out in this process that you would like to discuss now?

A: Nothing.

Q: Any questions for the Board?

Q: What does the Board look for in a Board/Superintendent relationship?

A: Differentiate between governance and operations. Have upfront discussions and a shared understanding of the roles of each. Also need the Superintendent to be a leader. The Board makes decisions largely based on the recommendations made by the Superintendent. The Board can also serve in an advisory roll when needed. The Superintendent should work to gain respect.

Q: What does the Board value about the Helena school district?

A: We live in a very supportive community. Helena values education. It is a well-educated area with the state government, the VA and the hospital being 3 of the major employers. It is a liberal town in a conservative state. There is a strong sense of family here and parents are willing to speak out and be heard when issues arise. We also find great support from the Helena Education Foundation.

Thank you.

IV. PUBLIC COMMENT

None

V. BOARD COMMENTS

None

VI. ADJOURNMENT

There being no other topics for future meetings and no public comments on issues not on the agenda, the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Luke Muszkiewicz, Chair

Gretchen George, Recording Secretary Date