



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

Thursday, February 11, 2021

9:00am

MINUTES

ATTENDANCE: Present unless otherwise noted

Luke Muszkiewicz, Board Chair
Siobhan Hathhorn, Board Vice Chair
Terry Beaver, Trustee
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 9:00 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

Kevin Aten

Dr Aten and his wife have been married for 33 years. They have 2 children, ages 30 and 27. They have 1 grandchild. His wife has also been a teacher her whole career as well. He is the first in his family to even graduate high school, so it is quite an accomplishment that he has gone on to the Doctorate level of his education. He grew up on a farm and he believes his life experiences have made him a bold leader. He spent 6 years in the classroom and then 10 years as the principal at a large urban high school. After that he went on to be a Chief Human Resources Officer at a district of approximately 21,000. He is currently the Superintendent of the Bayfield school district in Durango Colorado where he has been since 2018.

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

A: The community feels very strong, and the staff seem absolutely committed. He and his wife summer in Montana and would love to be here year-round. When the school district is in or near the capital city, there is another layer of advocacy and linkage to the state that is great. He is currently on the Education Commissioners Superintendent Advisory Council for his state, and he does things like that because he believes in advocacy and feels it makes a difference. He also did some consulting work in the Helena schools in 2011 and was very impressed.

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: His current school started the school year only 1 week late and they have been in person learning all year. Some classrooms have had to isolate and there have been a few quarantines, but the schools have stayed in session all year. As of today, every staff member in his district who wants to be vaccinated with their first dose of the vaccine will have it. He has had to make tough decisions during this pandemic, but he has been bold and is proud that everyone who wants to be vaccinated has had the opportunity. He says he will probably make everyone mad at some point, but he will also make them happy at some point. He tries to be steady and constant. Models have emerged to create opportunities for the kids. Social emotional is so important. Learning loss is an interruption. Kids need teachers and teachers need kids. We will learn kindness through this and caring and the social emotional will be even more important again. Also, he believes that through this, technology has advanced about 20 years' worth in 1 year.

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: Budget concerns with the new East Helena High School are at the top of the list. He comes from one of the lowest funded states for education and he has become adept to dealing with budget constraints. He is currently working to cut almost 1 million from the budget, but they have put together a good guide to do that well. He believes you must listen to every voice but in the end difficult decisions must be made. It is important to emphasize the other things the district

has to offer to keep kids coming here. If you get the process right with the people, they will come together. You must listen to understand.

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: Some districts have too many Strategic Priorities and if you have too many you cannot focus. When he looks at Helena's, he sees 6 clear areas that are critical. When the Board has a clear vision, then the Board can represent the people. He talks to Board members daily to keep them involved so they always have the answers as well when asked by stakeholders. Communication is a foundation of respect. Being transparent is important.

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: When there are too many priorities, you cannot focus. He cares deeply about authentic learning opportunities. He wants to be "toolish"- skill based. He thinks the emphasis on career and technical training is great. Students must be the priority and social emotional learning are part of that. He serves on suicide prevention and family outreach programs because he believes these areas are so important. He thinks it's also important to make sure the district is providing what the staff need as well. He wants to prepare kids for the future, not for the past. Also, being efficient with the budget and being able to always provide clean, safe classrooms and warm meals among many other things.

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: That is some of the hardest work that must be done. He was the Chief Human Resources Officer for 4 years in a district of about 2700 employees. He had to learn about getting people into the right role and sometimes people are just not a good fit. At one point, because of budget cuts, he had to let 16 staff members go. They were all amazing people. So, he has experience and knows how to do it. After he let those 16 go, he followed up by writing recommendation letters and helping them find the right things for them. He has read in studies that Doctors and teachers are some of the most committed people to their careers. When someone is not the right fit or is underperforming, he wants to give them the opportunity to make changes but even so, sometimes, the hard decisions must be made. It must be what is best for the kids. Its ok to move people around if that is what is needed. Kindness and respect should always be part of the process in all aspects. Usually, they already know it is not right, but it is important to always be clear and always be kind.

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

A: For his final 2 years as principal, he was on the bargaining team. He was in charge of bargaining for 4 years as the Chief Human Resources Officer. He urges people to google October 2015 and his name in a web search. After 80 hours of negotiations with a different Superintendent and a flawed process, the district was facing a lawsuit. When they got a new superintendent, he was included in the bargaining process. In 2 hours, he was part of the team that fixed what 8- previous hours could not in the Greely-Evans school district. To this day, he remains good friends with the Association President. He learned that relationships are key, and trust and respect are important. Always look for a win-win. Listen, empathize, what can we agree on, and follow up is the process that he uses. This process works for most situations. You cannot always please everyone and you can't have everything that you want but you can have 1 or 2 things you want. He wants to be able to say yes whenever he can and where appropriate.

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 describes himself as bold. He has nothing to hide. He is social media aware. He starts at the media. All the area reporters have his phone number. He has a background in radio and newspaper and understands the importance of media. He likes to have an ongoing relationship with the media. His office phone goes through to his cell phone. You can reach him at any time. With students, talking to them is the best part of the day. He asks students for their ideas and listens to their voices. He goes to sporting events and activities to talk to parents and families. He tries too always be open, honest and accountable. He feels it important to be around and be visible. He always wears his name badge, so people know who he is and he is always ready to stop and listen, no matter where he is. He thinks you need to be an extrovert to do a job like this and he is one. He wants to be the face of the district.

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 has a career and technical education director license. He was part of getting one of the largest innovation grants in the state. They just filed a 501C3 with his name on it. He wants to make sure to have those things to create well-paying jobs for graduates. The military is also a great option that can lead to a career. He has vast experience with Advanced Placement courses. He wants classes that give kids access to rigorous curriculum and give confidence of having those college credits by the time they graduate. He wants to help remove barriers. He believes in internships and apprenticeships. In his current district, every senior does a capstone project, and he believes this also helps to create after graduation opportunities.

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: The community work he does helps him to understand and connect to behaviors. If there are behavioral issues and chaos in the schools, you will see a higher incidence of behavior with the kids. He was the principal of a high school that was one of the top 10 in America for positive behavioral support. Kids expelled from other schools would come and graduate in his district. He believes in a wraparound service to include every kids. He would work on social emotional learning every day. Kids with IEPs of 504's gets the same love and wrap around. All means all. It does not cost a dime, it's just a mind shift. It's important that schools make sure that they are doing everything they can to meet each kid's plans and goals. It is important at the middle and high school levels to have the student be part of the planning meetings. Challenges are many, numbers are getting higher, but we need to invest. His current school is now adding a 17–21-year-old transition teachers now.

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 believes the number one measure of any school should be the graduation rate. Then you can build a triangle back from the graduation rate. Montessori was great for his one child but not the other and that shows that some programs do not work for everyone. He would track how kids are doing from each program and monitor through iReady to see which programs are producing successful kids. How do parents and teachers feel about the programs? Look at the qualitative and quantitatively measures. His current district has 20 kids enrolled in an alternative high school. These different programs can change lives. In the budget cutting area, we cannot afford to keep programs that benefit only one or two kids so he would look at different programs and directions in that circumstance.

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: A 400-person loss is certainly an impact. He has experience with declining and increasing numbers. Where he was a principal, there was a new high school built 8 miles north. The staff wanted to bash and say how bad the new school was but that is not the solution. He had to show how great his school was. It would be the same here. What does Helena offer that East Helena cannot? Well established school can sometimes offer things that new ones simply cannot. It is important to stay positive. It is a shiny new nickel and people will run to it for a time but there will be a time when it may all equal out. Provide a constant, steady message and plan of how to make it better. But there is no money tree, so you have to build a strong case for building and adding on and making improvements to our older schools. Be in it for the long game.

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: The next step of the school issue may involve closing a school or schools. When the populations shift sometimes buildings can be repurposed. At his current district, he has repurposed an old building to now house a school health-based clinic, a daycare co-op, and a local food bank and those things are a help to the community. Take a lemon and make lemonade. Sometimes, the hard decisions must be made to make the cuts.

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: Sometimes districts must make the hard decisions for the betterment of the district. They need to be phased in over time. He has done this at 2 different school districts. You must look at what makes sense. Give people options and be respectful. He has acted as a project manager in building projects at past schools. He has extensive experience with the buildings and bonds. You must go to the community and work with them. People want a voice, and they will support you.

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 loves serving people and he loves this work. He officiates at sport games to include basketball, football, and soccer. He and his wife love to be outdoors and out in their camper or hiking. They love the four-season lifestyle. His wife is also an educator and understands the life. He realizes that he does not always have the best balance, but he is happy to give so much to his career. He does believe it is important to have the balance though, so he tries to model the balance for others.

He wants the Board to know that he believes he has the right skills to tackle the issues the Helena District is facing. He has a big personality, and he gets things done. He is aware of the Helena Education Foundation and its great work. He also has an extensive knowledge of technology and technology integration and data.

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

A: No, not for him personally. He was, however, the principal at a school where a teacher was caught with a student. His name may come up in looking into that. But he turned that situation around and brought in a sex assault advocate and did some rebuilding around that situation.

Q: Any questions for the Board?

Q: What does the Board do for a successful Superintendent relationship and what are they looking for in a Superintendent?

A: The Board is committed to education. They are looking for that line between governance and operations. They use the Strategic Plan as a guide and want it to be clear. They are looking to have conversations at the beginning about roles upfront. They look for an open-door policy. The Superintendent needs to be able to make hard decisions and be fun to work with. The Superintendent should have good people relationships and should work to earn respect.

Thank you.

RECESS

Rex Weltz

Rex Weltz has spent 11 years in the classroom. He is certified in K-12 physical education and health and 5-12 in biology sciences. He spent 10 years as a Site Administrator, 3 years as an Elementary Principal, 7 as High School Principal in 3 different states. (Montana, Alaska, and Washington) He became the Superintendent of the Polson school district after that and did that for 4 years. He started his teaching career in Hamilton, MT and he is a graduate of Western. He fought forest fires to pay his way through college and worked in an open pit mine. He grew up in Noxon, MT. He is married with 3 kids and 1 grandchild.

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

A: When he first entered the district over the summer, he first noticed that the administrative teams were strong. He has predominantly worked with elementary administrators. COVID has limited the ability to work and meet face to face. Even so, he has learned so much from the principals he works with. His Rossiter team is a great group of amazing people who work hard 6-7 days a week. Helena has great, dedicated teachers and there are good systems in place.

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: As a leader, he learned that things change quickly, and schools need to be able to adjust. Communications skills are huge. Both unions in the district wrote letters of recommendation and both noted in those letters that he is an extremely effective communicator especially during the pandemic. He has kept people informed and he says it is important to be flexible. He does not have all the answers, but he keeps communication open with staff and families. He also is aware that there is unfinished learning stemming from this pandemic and he wants to work on that road to recovery. Those may be the priorities going forward as early as summer. He wants to look at the standard for the grade level above and below each class grade and work that all into a 2-3-year recovery plan.

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: He hasn't had a chance to get out and talk to many people and hear what the concerns are, but the financials are definitely being impacted by the opening of the East Helena High School. That is due to enrollment declines. Relationships with the community have also been strained because of the COVID issue and it will be important to work to rebuild that relationship. He has some ideas on how to close that divide and bring the community back together. He will be visible, and he will work to build partnerships. He feels it's important for the district to narrate the story, so others won't.

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: It is so important that there is even a policy for it. However, he does not need a policy to get along. That is one of his strengths. He works to have a relationship built on trust, positivity, and respectfulness. Each person is different. Communication is key. The Board governs and the Superintendent serves at the pleasure of the Board. The Board directs and the Superintendent carries out. He has always had a healthy relationship with his Boards. He does not want to be surprised and he won't surprise the Board. It is important to know and follow the chain of command. He wants to get to know the Board as people. He will work to understand what form of communication works best for each person. Some people like text over phone or email and vice versa.

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: Academics and how to grow students academically is one of the biggest pieces. They need to prioritize the standards. With COVID in mind, they will need to make changes to address social emotional needs. There will need to be recovery efforts built into the plan for the needs of both students and staff. Adjust the plan to rethink how business will go coming out of this.

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: One of the advantages to working in a larger district is that we can make sure we are moving people in accordance with the master agreements and collective bargaining agreements. He trusts the HR department is following procedures. The superintendent must make the directive. It is always important to treat people with dignity and respect regardless of what is taking place. He has no issue with moving people or terminating.

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

A: He has had a lot of experience with this as the Superintendent in Polson. In the past he has led most of these. He has handled the majority of the negotiations. It is not his favorite part of the job, but it is important to always maintain professionalism so it's always what's best for the staff while keeping within budget constraints. He would establish good relationships with the unions. He has worked hard in the past to develop these relationships. There needs to be transparency because in this area there is an inherent lack of trust. Teams need to be put together to look at the priorities.

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 loves this part of the job. Everything is his style. He moves and he does not sit. Email is not his favorite. Text is quickest. The district needs a comprehensive communication plan. Remind 101 has worked well for him in the past. He can communicate with parents through the website, Instagram, and Twitter. One size does not fit all. He wants to celebrate the districts success and communicate that to the community. He uses everything that works. As we communicate, trust grows. The Superintendent should be the face of the district. He likes to go on the radio and tv to talk about the district.

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: Experience spans from CTE courses up to AP classes. As a Principal, he worked to provide more opportunities in video editing, business, marketing, and industrial shop classes. Another track into the workforce is through the military. Also, in Polson, they partnered with the Providence Hospital to provide internships for Juniors and Seniors to rotate through the ER, billing department and diagnostic imaging. He wants to make sure there are equal opportunities for males and females.

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: More students are coming in. He would work closely with the special ed department and student services to analyze what can and cannot be done under the budget. In the past, they have brought mental health therapy directly into the school. He carved out a space for the therapist in the building. Staff is very tired, and they need to be supported as well with compassion. He would like to bring in extra training for staff and support them as well.

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 is thrilled to be in a district that provides so many opportunities for students. He wants Helena schools to be the magnet schools. He believes the alternative high school provides a valuable opportunity to many. He wants to see how kids are doing in each program and see how parents feel. He wants to look at which programs are assets to the community. Student outcome is the key.

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 experience with transitioning enrollment. Kids bounced around schools in the district he was in. The district must be exceptional to be where people want to be. He would build teams to include parents. He would strengthen relationships. We may not get them all, but we can make it difficult for them to want to leave. We must ask kids what they're thinking and seeing and wanting 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: Costs are going up and revenues are going down. In the 2017/19 legislative sessions, schools were given areas to be more flexible to take the burden off the general budget. Currently about 92% of the general budget goes to salaries. Our business office is solid. Janelle and her team are a good resource. That is a reputation that they have all over Montana and he trusts it. As an example of the flexibility, transportation funds can be moved to health and safety. Sometimes you can reallocate funds. Keep an eye on the legislative session as well.

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: Construction, land and facilities work have followed wherever he has been. In Hamilton, he helped to build the new High School in 1997. In 1999, he went to Alaska and as an elementary principal in the mid 2000's, he was at a school meant for 400 kids that was housing 640. He was the project manager for building a new elementary. After moving to Washington, a bond was passed to build a new high school and he was part of that effort. In Polson, snow took out the gym, so he had to work on the repair of that facility. He has seen bonds fail as well. He has experience holding community meetings and communicating through social media and pamphlets, etc.... He will work to update the aging buildings in the Helena school district.

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: His kids are out of the house now and he is at a good place in his life to focus on a job like this. He does not like to fail so he works very hard. He will ask the Board to help if needed. He likes to cook, camp, and work out. He will take time and unplug when he feels he needs it. It is just the right time in his life and career to do a job like this one. He is confident he can do the job and do it well. Helena is his home now.

He has ambitions are to be great and he wants that for the district and the kids. His parents instilled the importance of education in him and helped him to get a college degree. He believes education changes lives. As he gets older, he has matured and realized he does not know everything. It is ok to ask for help and get support from those around you. He also has coached basketball, baseball, and track.

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

A: If you google his name and Polson school district, you will find the story of the color wars that went viral. During Polson's homecoming dress up days, each class picked a color and whichever class wore the most of that color won for the day. One class's color was white, and they wrote "white power" on their shirts. They were asked to take them off and they did, but not before taking pictures in them, which then got out and went viral across the country and painted a very different picture of what was going on. It was misunderstanding but he apologized for it and even call the tribal council and apologized.

Q: Any questions for the Board?

Q: What are quality indicators that set Helena schools apart?

A: Supportive and education minded community, good longevity and retention of teachers, excellence with high achieving students, Janelle and the business office are exceptional, teachers are exceptional and dedicated, Helena Education Foundation is a huge asset, great variety of classes, passion of the families and staff and we are the capital and people look to us to provide leadership.

Thank you.

2. Superintendent Search -- Review Background & Reference Checks -- CLOSED SESSION (Personnel Specific: This portion of the meeting will be closed because the demands of individual privacy clearly exceed the merits of public disclosure. MCA 2-3-203)

B. ITEM FOR ACTION

1. Superintendent Search – Select Finalists

All Board members agree that Dr Kevin Aten and Rex Weltz are the most qualified to move forward to the finalist interviews, set for February 19.

Reasons given:

Dr Kevin Aten: Has experience as Chief Human Resources Officer in collective bargaining issues. He is a good communicator and natural relationship builder. He is the strongest and most experienced on paper.

Rex Weltz: He has been both an elementary and high school principal. He has a MT Superintendents license already. He has a passion for education.

Motion: Accept Dr. Kevin Aten and Rex Weltz as the 2 finalists made by Trustee Hathorne, Second by Trustee McEwen

Public Comment: None

Board Comment: None

Vote: 8-0. Motion carries.

IV. PUBLIC COMMENT

Courtney McAdams: She would like the Board to look at some of the stats on the kids who are in the yellow or red zone currently. When will the Board create a plan to fix this issue? Will that be this summer? Is this something that can be added to the agenda?

V. BOARD COMMENTS

Thank you to all 29 candidates. Thank you to Chairman Muszkiewicz who has worked very hard through this whole process. Thank you to HYA.

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