

November 18, 2011

Statement to the Community from Citizens Advisory Committee

Last April, the 16-member Citizens Advisory Committee to the South Bend Community School Corp. Board of Trustees met for the first time. We are a diverse group of all ages, from all walks of life and of many backgrounds. Most of us didn't know each other before our first meeting. We faced a task of uncertain scope and complexity. But what was clearly understood by all was our goal: To assist the school board in conducting an open, transparent search for the school superintendent who could best lead this corporation. It would be up to us to figure out how to accomplish that task.

Not everyone in the South Bend community – indeed, not everyone on the CAC – is entirely pleased with events regarding the superintendent search that occurred in the first two weeks of November. However, we do strongly agree that the unprecedented public engagement in the process over the last seven months has played a vital part in one of the most critical decisions facing the South Bend schools in this decade. We think it is important that residents of this community, and especially the hundreds who contributed their input to the search process, understand how meaningful the public's role has been. When the CAC convened in April, our first task was to advise the board on the selection of a professional search firm. The next task was to agree on our objectives. That was easy: We would be as inclusive as possible in collecting public input. It was important that residents tell the board and the search firm their views on the strengths and challenges facing the South Bend schools, and the qualities important in a superintendent. This information would be used first by the search firm in recruiting candidates and in recommending finalists to the board, and then it would be used by the board in making its hiring choice. The CAC determined that it would use the broadest definition of “inclusive” that it could. First, CAC members asked for and compiled input from people in their own circle of acquaintances.

Then it set out to design a more formal process of civic engagement. There were obvious community groups whose input would be sought: Civic and political leaders, teachers, students, parents, business leaders, unions. We also would reach out to ethnic groups, religious leaders, colleges and universities, news media, pre-school providers, medical service providers, public service agencies and charities of every sort. The list grew. The CAC felt strongly that people whose voices too often go unheard must be included. Indeed, the list couldn't be too long.

In all, 29 separate public forums were held at locations throughout the school corporation. In addition to the general public being invited to participate, 180 individual invitations were mailed. These forums were conducted by the search firm in September and also attended by CAC members. The responses were carefully compiled for the use of the search firm and the school board.

The CAC's next task was to narrow the large forum participation component into seven focus groups that would interview the publicly announced finalists for the position of superintendent. The first focus group was easy to define since it consisted of the CAC itself. We also designated focus groups consisting of school support staff, parents, higher learning and community outreach leaders, business and political leaders, students, and teachers. Each group was asked to write its own questions, present them to the candidates (with follow-ups for clarity), and then reach consensus as to strengths of the candidates and areas of concern. In addition to providing its own input, the CAC assisted in conducting the focus groups. This final task in the long process was completed Nov. 17.

It never was the role of the CAC to tell the school board who to recruit or who to hire. That is the board's responsibility alone. The CAC's job was to gather the broadest possible input from the South Bend community, to boil it down into concise and meaningful information, and then to direct it to the ultimate decision-makers. We believe our job was well done, and we know the results were taken seriously by both the search firm

and the Board of Trustees.

Public processes are messy things. They lead to conflicting opinions, second-guessing, frustration and, sometimes, anger. That no doubt is why South Bend schools (and many other organizations to be sure) have a history of avoiding them. It is far easier to make decisions in private and just announce them after the fact. The problem with that is that nothing is more public than public schools. The public has a right to be heard and to see the process unfold -- warts and all. We, the Citizens Advisory Committee of the SBCSC, are proud of the role we played in making that happen, and would like to publicly thank the SBCSC Board for establishing the CAC and inviting our community to participate in the process of hiring our next SBCSC superintendent.

Citizens Advisory Committee Members: Jennifer Craig, Carla Crittendon, Gayle Dantzler, Toni Fein, Terryl Grembowicz, Brienne Irey, Julaine James, Rahman Johnson, Oletha Jones, Milt Lee, Rudy Monterossa, Jr., Peter H. Mullen, Jeff Rea, Celeste Ross, Darrell Sanders, Robert Urbanski