

Message to the McPherson Community

October 1, 2018

On September 24th, the Board of Education and school leaders listened to parent and community concerns about various aspects of the district's redesign effort. The school has begun and will continue to respond to the concerns that were expressed. One of my responsibilities, as a school leader, is to help us find common ground as we proceed. As I've watched redesign emerge in our schools, I've found that we have nearly unanimous agreement on key points.

Parents, school staff, and community care passionately about OUR children. As board and school leaders listened, we heard parents express heartfelt concerns, many times with deep emotion. There is a sign in the room where the Board of Education routinely meets that says, "*We will focus our decisions on what is best for students.*" For years, this simple statement has been the driving force as decisions were made about our schools and our students. This statement also sets the standard for every school employee. As decisions are made, all of us must continually ask, "How do we best serve our students?"

We honor and respect our teachers. Many people have expressed how much they respect our teachers. Many said that their concerns were not about teachers. Teachers in McPherson are our most valued asset. They are highly trained professionals who understand teaching and learning; they are our experts. Our world depends on experts. If we have a health issue, we go to a highly trained and qualified physician. If we need financial advice, we find a financial advisor who is trusted, trained, and knowledgeable. If we want to do what's best for student learning, we must rely on those professionals who are in the classroom daily with students—our teachers.

We want our students to be safe. Everyone agrees that student safety is essential. We need assurance that our children are safe from the evils of the world. We want to be certain that what children see and do in school is wholesome and appropriate for their grade level. We live in a world where we see, almost daily, that even under the best circumstances this isn't always possible. Parents and educators must be vigilant in protecting our children.

The community of McPherson has high expectations of our schools and a proud tradition of excellence. People across Kansas have long respected the schools in McPherson. We have a reputation of being a great place for kids. Students from our schools have consistently excelled in both the academic and the extracurricular world. Our board has demanded that these same high expectations be applied to the work of redesign. Everything that happens in our schools must be measured compared to these high expectations.

We live in a challenging world that demands changes in each student's learning experience. After asking people across Kansas to define a successful high school graduate, the Kansas State Board of Education has developed a vision for Kansas education—"***Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.***" Few can argue with a vision that calls us to be the best in the world. Yet we cannot get substantially better in this challenging and changing world by continuing to approach teaching and learning as we have in the past. A simple statement seems applicable: "*If we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got.*" The demands of our world require that students emerge with a far different set of cognitive skills, attitudes, and work values. This requires changes in teaching and learning.

So how will we achieve this? After listening to and consulting with our staff, our parents, and our community, I will be making several recommendations to our Board of Education that I believe will address the concerns I've heard.

- **Continuation of Redesign**--Last spring our board endorsed Redesign Plans that were enthusiastically proposed by teams of teachers. These teams spent a year researching, discussing, evaluating, and planning for these changes. Teachers owned that work then, and they own these changes now. I have full trust and confidence in our teaching staff as we implement the plans that were developed. We need to put our trust in our teachers and the work they are doing.

As with any substantial change, we will find that some things need to be done differently, that some 'great ideas' don't work as planned, and that some of our best intentions did not produce what we expected. We will evaluate, respond, and adjust when needed. Those changes will always be based on our commitment to focus on what's best for our students.

- **Communication**—It is evident from comments and concerns expressed by parents that the school has not adequately communicated about redesign. Communication efforts are being intensified. Parents will be personally invited into our schools to observe teaching and learning. A written response to parent questions is being composed and will be shared with parents. Parents are encouraged to ask questions, to seek additional information, and to visit their child's classroom(s).
- **Internet Safety**—Our efforts to provide a safe Internet environment for students have been intensified. We have made adjustments in our filtering and firewall capacities. We are providing additional protections through a more rigorous vetting process. We have consulted with and will be utilizing the services of independent entities to review our Internet safety protocols. As with all safety concerns, we are committed to doing all we can to keep our students safe.
- **Long-range Evaluation**—The Board of Education will be forming an independent evaluation team that will examine the work of redesign and report to the board sometime next spring. The team will be led by an independent professional with substantial experience in teaching and learning. A cross section of our community, representing parents, patrons, and school personnel, will be invited to join this team. This independent report, along with evaluations completed by each school's redesign team, will inform the board concerning our subsequent work.

I have full faith and trust that those charged with providing a quality education will act in the best interest of our students and our community. We ask for your continued support and partnership in achieving this goal. Thank you for trusting our professional staff to lead our work in redesign.

Respectfully submitted,

Gordon Mohn
Superintendent of Schools