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Interview #1: Business Services Interview Reflection

Key Observations

My interview with Troy School District's Assistant Superintendent of Business Services, Mr. Rick West, took place on February 10th, 2015. After the most cordial of email correspondences, we agreed to meet in my own classroom at Costello Elementary School. Rick was a very dapper fellow, who did not at all give off the impression of a "numbers cruncher" or "math dweeb" as one might expect. His smile was easy, and the genial father of two made himself right at home as we got down to business. I know that we're not supposed to give a play-by-play of our interview, but for the sake of organization, I thought I'd still use my six interview questions to guide my observations of this very important position within the district.

1) What lead you to this position? What do you like most about the job? What are the biggest challenges?

In opening our conversation, I posed this question to Rick. I thought it would be a good opener, and break the ice between us as strangers. It did more than break the ice, it opened up a window into the soul of this man. Throughout our interview, we would continue to return to the overarching theme of the discussion, which was that Mr. Rick West believes in the premise and the practice of public education, and he does his best to ensure that the intricate balance of art and science of teaching can continue for the children that we serve, through his management of our finances.

As a graduate of both the University of Michigan, and recipient of an MBA from Texas A&M, Rick brings several years of experience to Troy. From his time as Business Manager of Atherton Community Schools, and Executive Director of Business Services and Finances in Royal Oak, Mr. West brings with him a plethora of experiences, both good and bad, that have helped him to shed a unique light on the cabinet team of Troy. "Not one day is the same," he said, as he described his most important passions in the role. His 1 year, 3 month tenure in the district has lead him to view his role in a completely different way than ever before. Aligning himself to our superintendent, Dr. Richard Machesky's vision, Rick spends a lot of his time outside of the business offices. Three times a week (or more if he's being pestered for an interview), Rick gets to spend time in the schools. As a former substitute teacher and coach,

Rick understands children, and enjoys being around them, ergo his time within the 20 school buildings of our district are rejuvenating. While he sometimes has to spend his time dealing with the politics of our 20 building principals, all asking that he prioritize different programs, he truly seems to enjoy getting to spend time around the kids, and see the beauty of public education at work. While the biggest challenge for him is to do more with less, he seems to truly have a gift for prioritizing the most important items that will keep our district solvent, and ensure that by managing the logistics, he can ensure stability for our district even in the most turbulent of times.

2) What are the most important practices that you employ as the leader of the business department to maintain the fiscal health of your district?

Far and above all of the pointers that he gave about what practices a district can employ to maintain the fiscal health of our district, he emphasized that building human relationships lies at the center of his work. Without said relationships, it might mean that you get compliance from your team members, rather than commitment to your organizational goals, which would not be a good thing. He repeated multiple times, the importance of listening to the people, and collaborating in making decisions to prioritize what is truly most important to your district. In our case, he said, it might seem like he is the one holding the purse strings on all things financial, but in reality, our purpose is what drives the spending. He said that our department of teaching and learning are the ones who truly decide the budget, and demand the dollars to be spent. That is why we exist, after all, he acknowledged, so it makes sense that teaching and learning would influence our direction, more than a top-down approach to doing what we do. Establishing these relationships, with the people on the front lines, will ensure that everyone sees eye-to eye when the difficult decisions have to be made.

3) If you could change anything about the way that Michigan's educational funding system is set-up, what would you change and why?

For Rick, with eight years of experience under his belt, he has never seen the “good times” of yore, when public education wasn’t under the knife and microscope at every level. We discussed “Proposal A” at length, and the current system of school funding, and he had a very good observation: that it is a system designed to work most optimally when the economy is growing. In the late 90’s, it was a godsend, and everyone was happy. But due to some inherent flaws in the system, it seems now that it is a funding theory that only works in theory. In practice, we have a “sky is falling situation”, that leads to great inequities in our state. Rick’s disgust of the polarized system of “haves” and “have nots” was apparent, and we discussed the benefits of

investing in lower education, preschool and the like, that would greatly mollify the inequity, and lead to lower correctional costs, therein freeing up more funding for k-12 education. While he acknowledged there would be no “silver bullet” to fix the predicament we find ourselves in today, he pushed that he believed that we could right ourselves once again, once we reach a stable, and adequately funded system.

4) *How do you see the business services office affecting the culture of our district as a whole?*

Modest as he is, Rick acknowledges the positive impact that he and the whole central office team have had in the last school year, setting the tone for a more friendly, and mutual interest-based relationship. The visibility alone, that he and the other cabinet members have demonstrated, at Union meetings, in the school buildings, and at extracurricular functions, have made leaps and bounds in fighting the rhetoric of stand-offish administrators that had previously existed in our central office atmosphere. In creating a climate of mutual respect with teachers and other stakeholders, the central office team has been given more leeway to agreeably disagree with some of the points of contention that exist between these less-than-ever opposing parties.

5) *What are some of the common mistakes that school and district leaders make that lead to budget problems? How to avoid these?*

In discussion of this question, a couple of obvious examples of “what not to do” came up. Superintendents being arrested for robbing banks, chief financial executives being taken out in handcuffs, principals being arrested for embezzlement and the like... We basically arrived at the general conclusion that one should not give in to greed, or the feeling of entitlement. Too many times, embezzlement has lead to the downfall of otherwise good people. If you lose an appreciation for the process of accounting, or have an innate fear of finances, it can only lead to bad outcomes.

6) *What advice do you have for non-business people that assume leadership roles in schools?*

A really good piece of advice that Rick had for me was to not be overly reliant on other people, such as secretaries, for your accounting practices. Be open and honest about your understanding of the process, and ask for help when you need it. Ultimately, no matter who in your building is doing the accounting, the administrator will ultimately be responsible if something goes awry. By maintaining realistic expectations of what you can afford and accomplish, you should have no problems. And most importantly, don't embezzle!

Personal Take-away

I really enjoyed my time with Mr. West. I guess that I had a lot of preconceived notions about what a financial officer of a school district might act like, but he broke all of the stereotypes of what I was expecting. In all of my interviews with the various people in my district and outside of it, from the executive director of strategic communications to the superintendent himself, I realize that these are ordinary people doing extraordinary jobs that affect the lives of literally thousands of children on a daily basis. While it is a pretty awesome responsibility, it is also a doable job, done by regular human beings, who I assume put on their pants one leg at a time, just like me! These are good, honest people, and not the enemy. They are tasked with a difficult job, and to see them as anything but allies would be a mistake. While it takes a special set of skills to navigate budgets and state aid reports, it takes heart to do it well. Luckily, with Mr. Rick West at the helm, I feel we will be in good standing for quite some time.