**Superintendent’s Update July 16, 2018**

As I am sure you have noticed, there have been many district changes in the last year, and I thought this would be an appropriate time to provide some context and provide a macro view of the direction the district is headed.

This is a very singular district in many ways, with very impressive assets. This is a community with many families who intentionally move here because they value diversity in all of its meanings, a community that wants its educational system to develop the whole child – to cultivate good world citizens. This is a community – when it’s at its best – that wants all children to succeed and is willing to take significant action in that direction. You are a deeply creative community with extraordinarily rich traditions in the arts, and a community that is beginning to look at STEM initiatives in a creative and very forward thinking way. And, of course it’s a community with involved, passionate and activist volunteers – who care deeply about education.

Thinking within that context, you should know that, from the start, the Board of Education expressed concern, and a true sense of urgency, relative to the state of many aspects of the district. They also impressed upon me that the community was crying out for some forward movement. Essentially, I was brought in to tackle problems that were put off for far too long.

I was told the Board wanted a seasoned superintendent who could hit the ground running. I have been a NJ superintendent for 23 years. I have seen it all, and you are not the only district to experience severe systemic problems – but they need to be addressed. Everywhere I looked, I realized the Board’s sense of urgency was validated.

For example, to name but a few:

* Evaluations were not completed for all staff;
* Building maintenance was not being adequately performed;
* Mandatory staff trainings were not taking place;
* Crisis management manuals were not in place;
* We created an accurate list of paraprofessionals, where they were located, and to whom they were assigned – it didn’t exist before.
* Over 60 policies were not in compliance with state requirements;
* Buildings were and are crumbling at an alarming rate. Water pipe are leaking; heat pipes burst in winter months; sewer backups cause schools to be closed or evacuated; ceiling leaks and more, you name it – it needs attention.

When we examined curriculum, we found 143 curriculums out of compliance or they simply didn’t exist. Between November of 2017 and March of 2018, we revised all 143 curriculums. And we revised all state mandated policies.

In addition, to building a functioning administrative structure, the Board has decided upon a few big initiatives: Facilities and Bonding, QSAC preparation, Data Systems, and reduction in STEM levels.

In February, we reduced Mathematics and Science offerings by 14 levels. This has been an issue that has been discussed for many years – just last week someone told me that they were part of a presentation to the Board to reduce STEM levels in 1988. We could not afford to kick this can down the road one more time.

In February, we introduced a plan and the Board approved it, along with the supports necessary for students to succeed. It wasn’t popular in some quarters, but we stepped up and did the right thing. We completed a long overdue initiative – reducing levels while maintaining opportunity and rigor. And please note – there are plenty of honors and AP courses to challenge students. But the layers of levels within basic courses like 10th grade geometry were rightly eliminated.

As I walked through the district buildings, in just a few minutes I could see the infrastructure was visibly crumbling.

In May, we introduced a $130,000,000 proposal for bonding to secure the funds needed to fix the crumbling infrastructure of your buildings, add space, and eliminate *de facto* segregation at the elementary level. We held 6 public meetings attended by approximately 1000 people in total. We took input and are spending the summer adjusting and revising the plan, which we will bring back to the public in the fall and then will present a bonding proposal by January.

There has also been a major reorganization of staff, as well as changes to the organizational chart itself. This was all done methodically, carefully, and always with an eye towards what is best for children, while simultaneously attempting to align people‘s strengths with district needs.

I speak with experience when I say: in most districts, just one of these major initiatives, in and of itself, would take a full year or multiple years. We took it all on in one year. Why? Because you don’t have time. What I was told by the Board at my point of entry, and what I watch on video from the community – going back years – was validated in my on-the-job-assessments. This district, despite its many obvious assets, is in need of Urgent care. Time is something you ran out of.

We thought, we planned, and sought input from the community. We moved forward with forethought. We moved quickly, methodically and we didn’t move without long and deep reflection; and again, always with an eye towards what we think is best for children. In the long run, I think this community will be stabilized and back on track for amazing success.

We now have the very rare and very exciting opportunity to remake, re-imagine some important aspects of our school system. For years, we have used small piece-meal solutions to address deep issues – moving school boundaries 3 blocks here or there, patching roofs, etc. We now have the opportunity, in some important ways, to clear the slate and make intentional, well-planned, important structural changes. An opportunity like this is a once in 50-year opportunity. And this community actually does have what it takes to get this right – if we are careful and we let the better angels of our nature guide us.

This means that we need to be collaborative, listen to each other, and work very hard to engage in constructive civil discourse.

I think you all know better than I that this might be the hardest challenge of the entire process.

Our country is not offering us a good example of civil discourse. But, we can be different – maybe we can come out of our silos and echo chambers, be open to reflection upon our certainties and keep our eyes on creating a school structure poised for 21st century education – for all children.

I know people are understandably upset by some of the changes. I want to assure you. If you agree or disagree with our decisions, please understand they were made after long and deep reflection…

The Board didn’t sign up for this non-paying position to do harm. I didn’t come here to cause you angst and aggravation. I committed to utilize my years of experience and my best judgement. I committed to thoughtfully push forward to position this district to best serve children. And I committed not to leave the tough decisions behind for the next person to solve.

I believe this district is poised for a new Dawn – if we can step together into the future.

There are two recent issues I also feel obligated to address:

There were some suggestions and some direct accusations that sending a communication out on a Saturday evening was an attempt to sneak something by the public. I would like to add some background which may bring clarity to that situation. Late spring, this Board, like most boards, passed a resolution giving the superintendent latitude to hire personnel prior to board meetings. This is done because a significant portion of personnel moves are typically made over the summer – in every district. And it’s not always easy to get a quorum. Those personnel moves are then required to be approved by the Board at the very next meeting.

And so, on June 30, I sent approximately 10,000 emails to parents, staff and members of the press announcing personnel transfers which were to take place July 2. That was to give the staff as much lead time prior to the opening of school as possible. The June 30 memo would have gone out a day or two earlier, but there were logistics regarding salaries which had to be cleaned up.

Using email, I informed 10,000 people and members of the press on June 30th, 17 days before this meeting….17 days before the meeting in which I have to get a majority of the votes in order for my action to continue.

I submit to you, that a reasonable person would not use that game plan to limit public participation or sneak something by them.

Another concern I would like to address is the number interim positions in the district. On first look, that may seem like a bad thing. But actually, it’s by design**.**

Let me tell you a story that may help explain our position. Early on in my career, I became the superintendent of a district in which I inherited tenured senior staff. Often people would ask “what’s the toughest part of being a superintendent?” My response often shocked them, when I would say “how would you like to be in charge of an organization in which you’re the only one who can be fired?” Superintendents in NJ cannot receive tenure, by law.

If we think about the central office staffed by retired interims, they are able to build a solid foundation utilizing years of experience. The maximum time they can spend here is 2 years. I will be the first to leave at the end of this school year. But the Interim Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum can stay 7 months after my departure, the Interim Director of Special Education can stay about a year after my departure, and if we bring in another interim assistant superintendent, they will have a year and a half. Ideally, a new superintendent can pick his or her own senior staff and partner with a willing interim that has an end date already set.

These exits will be staggered, and provide an orderly transition, allowing someone to digest their surroundings and make their own decisions about who is a good fit for them. I couldn’t in good conscience pick someone else’s staff and hope it’s a good fit for them. Another reason interims are good, in this particular district, is the need to establish basic building blocks and fundamental administrative procedures which I have found to be lacking. When I was coming up through the ranks, for every position there were established procedures. I followed a blueprint and added my flavor to it as I settled in. Many SOMSD administrators have had to make it up as they went along. Our team of interims will build that foundation and exit in an orderly fashion within the spirit of wanting the next person to succeed.