

GOVERNING, EDUCATING, AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Takeaways from Eight Years of School Board Service

By Seth Rosenblatt

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As I conclude my eight years of service on the Governing Board of the San Carlos (California) Elementary School District (SCSD), I find it important to reflect on the big lessons that I've learned through the governing process. Although my experience is of course tied to the specific path taken by the San Carlos School District and the nature of its community, I'm certain that these lessons have a broader relevance to anyone involved in a public school district, or perhaps even public agencies in general.

No doubt there is overlap among these lessons, and many reinforce the others, however I made an attempt to group them into digestible chunks. I was first attempting to create a "Top 10 List," but alas I could not keep it to that. So, to paraphrase Nigel Tufnel from *This is Spinal Tap*, this list goes to eleven!

1) Avoid the Temptation of Reductionism

I include this one first because it has a thematic underpinning to many of the subsequent lessons listed. We're all at risk of inappropriately simplifying issues – it's essentially a coping mechanism of the human brain as well as our approach to politics in general.

But it's important to keep reminding ourselves that a school system is a complex ecosystem – there's always a lot more going on that meets the eye, and there are almost always secondary and tertiary effects to every action or every decision. Our community needs to continually remind itself that it's nearly impossible for all of us to have equal information or to have had equal time studying an issue, so we need to avoid the temptation to base an opinion solely on one thing you hear or an article you read in the newspaper.

This is one area where it's worth illustrating the distinction between private enterprise and government. Private businesses are certainly complex as well, but they don't have the burden of transparency as does a government agency. Ironically, that transparency gives the illusion of simplicity – for example, judging the quality of a school (or a teacher) on test scores. We know the truth is much more complicated than that.

Therefore, the burden is on all of us to always appreciate – and ensure that others appreciate – that issues are complex, nuanced, and often affect an entire ecosystem in a way that most can't realize. (I appreciated the quote

"By the time a man realizes that his father was right, he has a son who thinks he's wrong."

Charles Wadsworth

from Charles Wadsworth because it reminds us that governing, like parenting, is a bit more complex than it is often perceived.)

2) Remember Whom You're Representing

Perhaps the most unusual part about school board representation is that we largely represent the people who cannot vote for us – these are the children in our community. And although parents are proxies for their children, they are imperfect ones because their experience, timeline, and scope of interest will be inherently narrower. Even on occasion, the children's interest may not be the same as the parents' interest (or what the parents believe is in their child's interest).

We all agree that getting supportive parents and other family members to be part of the educational process is crucial. We also want to ensure we have inclusive decision-making processes. San Carlos is successful in large part because of the community energy we harness.

"If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."

John Dewey

But we must recognize that there are very few services consumed with the frequency of public education, creating an unrivaled intimacy between the family and this public institution. I would argue that this intimacy makes it all too easy for parents – many of

whom are highly educated and successful – to fall into the trap of thinking that they know more than the experts. As a parent, I've had this same feeling. Why is this? Why do we have a tough time understanding the fundamental difference between being involved intimately in supporting schools and actually running a school or educating children?

The metaphor that I've used often is that we've all had the experience of believing we can run a restaurant because we all eat. But intellectually, we know it's very different to actually run a restaurant than to patronize one. That would be falling into reductionism. Parents and all community members can believe multiple truths that are not in contradiction: that it is absolutely our job to demand great schools and to hold people accountable, but at the same time have a level of humility to recognize that most community members are not experts and that schools only succeed as a partnership between the school district and the community.

3) You Don't Need to Act Like a Politician

Unfortunately we have a default mode in U.S. politics – and it's not pretty. On a Federal or State level, this level of cynicism may be well deserved – our political leaders are often beholden more to party than to the people; they are unduly influenced by money and special interests; they are too far away from their community; and they often have personal career stakes into maintaining their position.

So, as an electorate, we respond with mistrust, assumption of ulterior motives, and take to communicate with our elected officials through divisiveness, shaming, “gotchas,” etc.

So, it’s not surprising that some folks in our community default to that mode when either evaluating what we do or engaging with us. However, what they often fail to realize is that none of the conditions that created this cynical construct exist with local school board members. We don’t declare a political party; we don’t need excessive amounts of money to run for office; we’re not beholden to special interests, and it is certainly not a career path for almost all of us.

We’re just volunteers like so many others in the community, and we’re just residents that you can talk to in the supermarket or on the soccer field.

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”

Harry Truman

However, when passions run high, people often forget this context, so we have to remind the public that we have the ability to forge a different model of engagement. One way for school board members to support this notion is to not act like politicians – be genuine and honest, don’t look like you’re just trying to please everyone, and even call people out on bad behavior. Which leads me to the next lesson...

4) Haters Gonna Hate...

I want to preface this maxim by noting that in the grand scheme of things, an incredible majority of the San Carlos community as well as SCSD employees are incredibly supportive of the District and do really work in partnership with us. The level of dysfunctional engagement by community members with our school district is relatively low compared to many other school districts even in this County, let alone some of the dysfunctional engagement endured by our city council.

But as a school board member, you have to recognize that every once in a while, we have to deal with the slings and arrows that often seemingly come out of the most unexpected areas. I’ve often expressed the frustration that we’ll have discussions about real meaty issues where we struggle to get people to pay attention, but mention the word “turf” and San Carlans organize, despite the fact that turf is likely the least important and impactful discussion we’ll have all year. My kids have often reminded me (and themselves) that we have lots of “first world problems.” Nature abhors a vacuum, and you don’t need to remind our city council members that San Carlos’ vacuum of real problems stirs up folks who just need some cause.

And for some reason, there are a few people who likely through some need to avoid cognitive dissonance have painted themselves as some sort of watchdog or counterbalance to the system without understanding the lessons above. I have on occasion reminded people that they lose the right to engage in the process once they start hating.

And consistent with the notion of not acting like a politician – don’t pander to the crazies – grow a second skin, don’t take it personally, but also call people on bad behavior. And unfortunately, since modern communication channels tend to amplify voices based on their persistence and passion rather than their accuracy, the District

“A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.”

Winston Churchill

needs to be diligent about constantly communicating its perspective.

Winston Churchill noted this problem about getting the truth out, and he didn’t have the Internet!

5) Understand the Value (and Limitation) of Data

Data can be really appealing – with so many things going on in a complex ecosystem, it’s too easy for subjectivity and bias to analyze or influence the workings of that ecosystem. So, fairly enough, many of us cry for more and more data. And having good data does absolutely lead to better decisions, which is why I’ve been excited about San Carlos’ dashboard efforts and the development of a good suite of measurements to the district health and to student performance.

But, in many ways we have to recognize that Data is often the instantiation of reductionism (API scores were perhaps one of the best examples of this). We all know the phrase, “lies, damn lies, and statistics” so we must recognize that numbers must always be viewed in context – what exactly are we measuring, what is the statistical significance, and what are the biases that are always inherent in such data collection

“Torture the data, and it will confess to anything.”

Ronald Coase

The desire for data can also be a smokescreen for the goal to delay or influence a specific decision. Often the cries of “we need more study on this” or “we need more data” are just exercises in obfuscation or CYA – EIR studies are often good examples of this.

It’s important to recognize that every endeavor in life runs on incomplete information, and every decision in life is based on incomplete information – there is always a asymptotic relationship between time spent on any one issue and the knowledge gained. (It’s interesting to note that this is an area where the private sector can be much more efficient than the public sector – companies much better recognize the “80/20” rule and making decisions under uncertainty, but as noted they have the luxury of not opening up their decision-making process to the public). And given the secondary and tertiary effects of any decision on our complex ecosystem, often the efficacy of any particular decision can’t be proven or disproven with data

We must also remember that often there is often an inverse relationship between the importance of an issue and the level of community engagement and time spent on such issue – so we must take into account the real cost required to gather all of the information we want relative to the importance of that decision.

Most importantly, don't ask for all of the information you want, rather ask for all of the information truly required to make decision – I always ask myself, “is that information actionable – will it help me make a better decision?”

6) See Around Corners

This is in some ways the most important role of any elected official – predicting the future. I don't mean that in any sort of mystic way, but rather about the perspective of trying to best understand the secondary and tertiary effects upon this complex ecosystem – decisions we need to make today that have an effect often over a long period of time. But sometimes doing this is difficult – on occasion, community members and even staff members won't be able to see around these corners as well

“If the road is easy, you're likely going the wrong way.”

Terry Goodkind

as you can because they are focused on an immediate issue. Those are the times when you need to use your best judgment and explain your reasoning as best you can.

The good news is that by doing this, we are modeling skills we want to see in our students – the ability to think critically, to recognize patterns, and to collaborate and communicate.

Related to the earlier point on data collection, we know it is very difficult to get a statistically valid sample of feedback from the community. The nature of the governing process almost always means we get a small sampling of viewpoints (it's way too easy to think that everyone agrees with the points that a few made at a board meeting, for example). Therefore, we need to actively seek out broader input (to the degree it is feasible) and ensure that we put all input into its larger context – but at the end of the day, a board member has to rely on his/her judgment to predict what is just around the corner.

7) Nothing (and No One) is “Away from the Classroom”

In my time on the school board, there is no phrase that peeves me more than this one. And unfortunately it is repeated by folks both inside and outside of education circles. It is the epitome of reductionist thinking and is actually a very dangerous approach to making decisions.

The notion sounds appealing and is often used when we have to face budget cuts – if we have to, shouldn't we try to make those cuts that have the least direct effect on our students? But just like many of the other lessons here, the phrase ignores the interconnectedness and complexity of educating a child.

First of all, the classroom is just one venue for learning, and the entire school environment is critical, including the library, gym, music room, art room, guidance counselor's office, sports fields, or even home. And, as we're pushing in SCSD's strategic plan, we're trying to broaden what we call the "classroom."

Most importantly, the expression ignores the inherent leverage of other places and roles in the school. Of course teachers are critical. But school counselors make the job of classroom teachers more effective by elevating the culture of the school, dealing with behavioral issues, and helping all students be more effective learners and members of the community – that is leverage. Also, can you imagine how a school would function without the school secretary? Can you imagine the power if we had more of them?

The other reason why this phrase irks me so is that it makes the false assumption that administrators have a secondary (or no) role in educating children, but rather are just part of the bureaucratic machine that is a school district.

*"It takes a village
to raise a child."*

African Proverb

Although a politically convenient statement, it is a gross simplification of how school districts actually work. Does the person who ensures teachers get paid not affect student learning? Of course she does. How about our principals, our district staff who work on special education and curriculum, our information technology folks who keep our networks running? Do they affect our students' education? Of course.

This false bifurcation of "near" and "away" from the classroom leads to other silly and often misleading efforts. For example, most parcel taxes and bonds contain language that says "no money for administrator salaries." Although it may be politically beneficial, it's one of the dumber things that we can say.

And ironically, the areas that school districts get most criticized for are the areas, that if they were to be properly addressed, would require money "away from the classroom," such as communications and community engagement, staff professional development, more robust staff evaluations, etc.

8) It's All About That Bass (and Treble)

I grew up as a math/science guy who also had a strong affinity for sports. I didn't have much appreciation – let alone a talent – for the arts. I certainly understood that others had passions and talents in these areas, but they always felt sort of secondary to me.

One of the most important things I learned in San Carlos – not just by being a board member but principally by being a parent – is the power of the arts, whether it be instrumental music, vocal music, theater, or the fine arts. In particular, I have been continually awed by the ability of young kids to perform in front of large audiences – to work through nervousness, to exhibit the confidence of someone who has worked so hard at something, to make mistakes and recover from them, and to work as a team to create something truly beautiful.

I recognize that I'm somewhat late in the game compared to many others who had these experiences growing up, but in any case I think we should all be grateful that this community is especially strong at valuing these areas. It has been incredible to witness our kids going through the process of exploring the arts – of course the research supports the positive benefits of the arts on “whole child” development and general brain function, but perhaps the most interesting thing to me is how the arts – as well as the liberal arts in general – are, perhaps ironically, the perfect expression of 21st Century Learning.

Certainly what we will do in our 21st Century Learning environments is infuse technology in everything we do and rethink our models of time, place, and human resources. But in a changing world where we can't predict what the jobs of the future will be, we know our students will succeed by being creative, critical thinkers and problem-solvers who have the ability to collaborate, communicate, and improvise. This is what the liberal arts – including the performing arts – are all about. And these skills also make them better people – it so often puts a smile on my face when one of our students will just come up to me on Laurel Street, say hi or shake my hand, and engage in a conversation, almost making me forget I'm talking to a kid. And at the end of the day, being a good person who knows how to engage with others may be the most important skill of all.

*“If you hear a voice within
you say ‘you cannot paint,’
then by all means paint.”*

Vincent Van Gogh

What the arts have given me personally is something even more specific. It has demonstrated the power of life-long learning. So impressed I had been by watching what our kids can do in the arts, I decided in my 40s to take singing lessons and try to learn something for

which I had just assumed for my entire life I had no talent. The perspective that one can be a life-long learner is a powerful notion that we can pass on to our children. I know it has enriched my life greatly, and I've had the time of my life pursuing it.

9) Risk and Change Must be the New Normal!

This may be the most interesting of the lessons. Governing agencies in general, and public education specifically, are not known for fast change and adaptability. As we've discussed before, we still use some of the same approaches for running schools as we did in the late 19th century. There is a lot of inertia in the system – some of it due to the legal framework, some due to risk avoidance, and much due to the phenomenon about adults being more comfortable with how they were taught. But despite all of that, there have been a ton of changes in public education in the last decade, both in general as well as specifically here in San Carlos.

Major changes have included the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP), Common Core implementation, Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC), California Assessment of Student Performance and

Progress (CAASPP), Transitional Kindergarten, new facilities, a new strategic plan, new school boundaries, as well as all of the ups and downs of the economy, just to name a few. There's a temptation to assume that most of the big changes are over so now we can take a breath – I don't think that's the case, and if anything we are at an inflection point in public education. Change will continue and probably should accelerate. In San Carlos, we can be one of the leaders of that change.

To progress, one has to take risks, a normally very uncomfortable position for a public institution (for many of the earlier stated reasons). But to build a culture of risk taking, we have to model behavior we want to see in

"A ship in port is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."

Benazir Bhutto

our students – embracing mistakes and looking at failure as an opportunity to learn and improve, not a "gotcha." But this stance will also require changing the relationship we have with the public – the taxpayer – for them to understand that not only will we make mistakes in the future, but that we must make mistakes in the future. If we're not, we're probably not stretching ourselves that much.

10) We Can Make a Larger Impact

Of course our primary mission is to serve the students of San Carlos and this community. But we can't forget that we can, and we will, have a larger impact – both through our own actions as adults as well as through the actions of our students as they become citizens of the world.

One of SCSD's goals has been to be a "beacon" for other school districts by our innovative approaches and the example we set. If even just a few school districts have been positively influenced by what we do, we will have made such a greater impact. Also, given our progress and thought leadership, we have the ability to be effective advocates, so I recommend that school board members do what they can to get involved in County-wide and State-wide organizations and causes. I would also postulate that being involved in issues larger than San Carlos most likely will enhance your ability to do your primary job here as well.

One story brings it home for me why we have this obligation to be part of the conversation. A few years ago, State Senator Jerry Hill called in leaders from all of the local school districts to talk about some pending education bills, including an effort to make pre-school universal. Imagine my shock when almost all of the education leaders in the room told Jerry that he shouldn't pursue this – they suggested that if their district had extra money, they wouldn't spend it on preschool for all. They thought they were just being logical – if there was extra money to spend, shouldn't it be directed to greater needs that they had? But they didn't realize they were falling into the trap of the "prisoner's dilemma," not understanding how a seemingly optimal decision for their district would be sub-optimal for the entire system. We must always keep in mind that bigger picture.

“Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

Lastly, let's not underestimate the impact that our own children can make on the world. For example, I never imagined how my then 6th grader's ROPES project could affect children halfway across the world, and in turn make an immeasurable impact on our own family. My family's involvement

with the rebuilding of the Ngererit School in Kenya all stemmed from that project, and we had the good fortune of being able to visit the school last summer. It was astonishing and humbling to witness the impact that this project has had, the amazing gratefulness and love from this community, and the enduring connection that our family now has with these souls halfway around the world.

11) Celebrate!

As a learning organization, it's natural to continually focus on areas we can improve, and of course many of our Board level discussions center around things we want to change. But that often masks the fact that so many things are going well.

Often there are so many great things happening in school districts, big and small, and it's all too easy to not even know they happened, to gloss over them, to assume that's business as usual, or to just forget them. It has been such a pleasure over these last eight years to be witness to all of the great things that have happened, so I celebrate them. No doubt the future will hold many more opportunities to celebrate, so take them when you can.

“When you learn to celebrate small victories, then you will gain the courage to win huge battles.”

Phinehas Kinuthia

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