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Community must aid search for SD2 leader

Gazette Editorial

"A person who is just about superhuman." That's how one participant in a community meeting about a School District 2 superintendent search summed up what Billings people wanted.

That was two years ago this week. A consultant hired by SD2 visited Billings and asked trustees and community members what they wanted in a new school leader. The answers included:

- Someone who could work collaboratively with unions because tension had developed between the previous superintendent (James Kimmert) and employee unions.
- Experience leading a large organization.
- Passion for education.
- The ability to listen and to be accessible.
- Ability to inspire people to action.
- Good rapport with parents and ability to get parents more involved.
- Someone familiar with Montana.
- Someone with cultural training.
- Abilities in personnel management, board work and community work.

Now that Superintendent Jo Swain is retiring, we're back to searching for a new school leader. Qualifications for the job may not have changed much in two years, but this community and its schools have gone through a lot of trauma. Time for hiring Swain's successor is short.

That's why The Gazette has offered to assist in providing the School Board with community input for the latest superintendent search.

The Gazette recognizes that the community must also be involved in analyzing our public schools' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. We need to let people vent and to give information. From this process, we must move forward to do our best for our school children. That includes getting a good person on board as superintendent for the 2003-2004 school year.

We commend board members for recognizing the urgency of launching a superintendent search. How best to proceed with the search is an item on the board's agenda for a special budget meeting beginning at 5:30 p.m. today in the Lincoln Center auditorium.

We have called on the School Board to hire a professional facilitator to help develop better working relationships on the board. Trustee Debbie Richert pointed out last week that: "We have been unsuccessful on our own to deal with the division that afflicts us and it is time to bring in a professional to assist us."

We support Richert's request to have the board discuss hiring a facilitator at its regular meeting on Jan. 20. However, the board doesn't need a facilitator to help in the superintendent search; it needs the help finding a basis for teamwork on the board itself.

The urgency and importance of the superintendent search must bring the trustees together. And, as Richert said, they definitely need professional help on togetherness.

Keep track of legislative action on school funds

Everyone who wants quality public education in Montana must keep two important words in mind: Montana Legislature.



<http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2003/02/10/build/opinion/editorial.inc>

Public must help pick SD2 leader

Gazette Editorial

The next superintendent of Billings Public Schools must be a good communicator and a great leader. Someone with business savvy, educational expertise, excellent academic credentials, experience in analysis and implementation of ideas, ability to think outside the box and strength of moral convictions. The superintendent must have compassion and understanding for the needs of minority students and for students of low-income families. The superintendent must be able to handle conflict and should have experience working with unions.

That's some of what we heard when the community was asked to help start the superintendent search at public forums last week.

Search for improvement

School District 2 is on a tight timeline for selecting a successor to Superintendent Jo Swain. The last time SD2 went on a full-fledged superintendent hunt, trustees came up empty. The next year's search was stopped when Swain applied for the job she had held on an interim basis.

Trustees need to review the shortcomings of the last search and correct them. There's no interim superintendent to step up this time. Trustees need to hire a competent school leader as soon as possible -- while good candidates are open to relocation.

The School Board made a good decision to contract with the Montana School Boards Association. Two years ago, the board paid for the work of an out-of-state consultant who didn't find a candidate the board wanted to hire. The MSBA knows Montana needs and has the resources to assist District 2.

Community comments

A second important step was the gathering of community comments, a task in which The Gazette agreed to assist trustees. There was some disappointment that turnout wasn't greater -- about 15 people Tuesday evening at Castle Rock Middle School and 40 Thursday at Lewis and Clark. But those who participated offered good insights. The discussions were lively and helpful for focusing on what's good about our schools and community, what needs improvement and how we can move forward.

The next steps in the search will be taken at the Feb. 17 School Board meeting. Deciding a timeline and process is on the agenda. Board Chairwoman Stevie Schmitz has promised the selection will employ a "community-based committee, a community-led committee." We thank the board for that commitment and expect it to be fulfilled.

Often, it takes a crisis for the "silent majority" to speak up. We urge Billings community members not to sit on the sidelines now that the November crisis has ended. School budget cuts may be coming. Spending priorities must be set. Employee contracts for teachers and support staff must be negotiated this year. Three trustee seats will be filled at the May 5 election. And nine trustees ultimately will choose the person to lead Billings Public Schools in these challenging times.

Summing up the superintendent requirements, Wayne Hirsch, a participant in Tuesday's forum said: "Super's the real word here."

We agree and add that Billings needs a super community effort to get the right person in this critical job.

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<http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2003/04/16/build/local/38-candidate.inc>

Candidate touts listening skills

By SUSAN OLP
Of The Gazette Staff

On Tuesday afternoon, superintendent candidate Michael Struiksma listed the challenges he sees for Billings School District 2.

Then he outlined ways to overcome those challenges and the qualities he possesses to aid in that process.

Struiksma, 48, spent an hour and 15 minutes sharing his thoughts on education, the district and himself during an interview with district trustees and members of a community committee. He sat at a table in the Lincoln Center board room facing his interviewers who jotted notes.

Four other superintendent candidates will be interviewed today, including: Donald Bryngelson at 11 a.m.; Kirk Miller at 1 p.m.; John McClaren at 5:30 p.m.; and Rodney Svee at 7:45 p.m. The interviews are open to the public.

Struiksma, assistant superintendent of Albermarle County Public Schools in Charlottesville, Va., summed up the district's biggest challenge in one word.

"If I had to pick the No. 1 issue I think the district faces, it's communication," said Struiksma, who spent Monday and Tuesday in the district meeting with staff, students and trustees.

In all of those meetings, he said, the need for better communication arose again and again.

"It's key in this district, from the top down and the bottom up," Struiksma said.

Solving the problem will take a great deal of listening, support, follow-through and the willingness "to value everybody's input in the process," he said.

"The person who comes in better be a good listener," Struiksma said. "It's also important to show respect for people through your words and actions."

Improving communication within the district and with the community will help cement trust, he said. "You have to earn it. You can't just flip on a switch and say 'Now you trust me.'"

Open, honest communication will also boost support in the community. Be open, honest and accurate, he said, and don't be afraid to admit mistakes.

In conflict situations, Struiksma said he tries to get parties together and facilitate communication.

"Then I leave and let them work it out," he said, adding that building consensus out of conflict can lead to a "win-win situation."

Be proactive, as well, in sharing the good news of the district, he said. "It's important to celebrate successes. Use (public relations) tools at the district and building level to get the good news out."

Another challenge, said Struiksma, is the need in the district to continue healing from the strike. He said he also heard the relationship between the board and district employees needs improvement.

Struiksma said he can meet those challenges because he's a "people person."

"I'm caring and sensitive," he said, saying that people shouldn't confuse that with being a pushover. It's more about the ability to tune into people and gauge their reactions, he said.

A sense of humor also comes in handy. So does knowing how to reach goals without losing a sense of the people involved in the process.



<http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2003/04/17/build/local/60-miller.inc>

Candidate tells of his experience with Havre schools

By SUSAN OLP
Of The Gazette Staff

Superintendent finalist Kirk Miller spent a chunk of his interview Wednesday describing how he handled a tough situation in Havre Public Schools.

Miller was interviewed by district trustees and a community committee Wednesday. He told about how declining enrollment and decreased funding forced the district to make some tough choices. Miller, who has a doctorate in education, has been superintendent in Havre since 1996.

Havre Public Schools has suffered an enrollment decline of 24 percent during the last seven years, Miller told the group. "It's my hometown, and that decline and correlating budget decline were difficult to handle."

Only so many programs could be cut before the quality of the district would be jeopardized, he said. Ultimately, the district closed one elementary school and turned neighborhood schools into grade-level schools. A grade-level school might have just one or two grades in one building.

The financial predicament also required significant changes in programming at the middle school and significant staffing changes at the high school.

"There were all these elements of pain," Miller said. "We were going to take a licking on it, but we were only going to go through it one time."

Most important, he said, was to "provide a vision of hope out of the pain that was inflicted."

That vision of hope included focusing on the educational benefits of grade-level schools, Miller said.

"There is strong research that it benefits kids if you put all second-grade teachers together into one environment," Miller said. "They can work together on a daily basis."

To sell the district and the community, Miller turned to communication. He worked with what he called the district's internal communication network and a similar external network in the community.

With the district staff and trustees on board, the changes could be sold in the community, he said.

The process also included listening to community concerns, he said. When people expressed a desire to see continued mentoring between older and younger students, that component was included in the plan, Miller said.

The community now sees increasing test scores, he said.

As chairman of the state Board of Public Education, Miller said, he is very aware of both state and national issues affecting education.

That includes everything from the federal No Child Left Behind Act to legislation affecting school districts. Miller said he had a hand in crafting some of the legislation currently before lawmakers.

Miller said professionalism in a district is key. He said he treats his employees, and expects them to treat each other, "in a professional and cordial manner."

That same behavior occurs at board meetings, community events and in informal settings, Miller said.

He said he developed a district advisory council that includes representatives of all employee groups. The goal of the group, he said, is to focus on planning for the district's future.

Miller works with the board on developing a strategic plan that acts as a blueprint for all activities in the district. He



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Schmitz pleased with local reaction

By SUSAN OLP
Of The Gazette Staff

The community seems to agree with the choice of Rodney Svee as the new superintendent of School District 2, Stevie Schmitz, chairwoman of the district's board of trustees, said Tuesday.

The board voted unanimously Monday to offer the job to Svee, with trustee Debbie Richert abstaining.

"I've had some folks call and say he is the right he is the right choice, and the right man for the right time," Schmitz said. "Some were from folks in the community and others were people who watched the process from a distance."

Svee, superintendent of Sheridan County School District 1 in Ranchester, Wyo., said he plans to come to Billings next week to negotiate a contract. He will first negotiate salary and benefits with the district's attorney, Larry Martin, who will forward a recommendation to the board, Schmitz said.

Trustees seem unanimous in their praise of Svee, applauding him for his ability to connect with people and his qualities as a healer. Svee was interviewed for the post along with four other candidates.

"When I was evaluating the finalists, my desire was to choose a candidate I believed was the best fit for what I believe the district needs at this time," Trustee Nilo Cabrera said. "At a different time, circumstances, any of the five would be successful."

Trustee Katharin Kelker said during discussions of the best choice for the post, she heard a lot of common themes. Like Cabrera, Kelker said she heard from others about the need for a communicator and someone who can connect with people with different points of view.

Those traits were most evident in Svee, she said.

Trustees Conrad Stroebe, Mike Dimich and Gene Jarussi all said a community committee organized to help with the superintendent search also picked Svee.

"It boils down to somebody with strong character, a calm demeanor and what I like to call 'scar tissue,'" Jarussi said.

Trustee Judith Herzog said she was looking for four specific qualities: a person who has the ability to heal the community; someone with excellent communication skills; a veteran in school administration; and an individual who has the ability to manage a district in very difficult financial times.

"One has risen to the top, and that is Mr. Svee," Herzog said.

Trustee Peter Gesuale concurred, saying Svee had earned the community committee's confidence and that of the board.

Richert said she abstained not because she didn't favor Svee, but because she felt left out of the process used to pick him.

She read a lengthy statement during Monday's board meeting criticizing board members for meeting last Thursday to narrow their choice for superintendent without her or Gesuale. She said she had informed trustees well in advance that she had a previous commitment on that day.

"It saddens me to have been excluded from the most important discussion that any school board can have -- the selection of the superintendent," Richert said. "A favorite (was) selected when the criteria about the characteristics and attributes has never even been determined or prioritized by the full board."



<http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2004/08/24/build/opinion/30-gazetteop.inc>

Gazette opinion: SD2 needs businesses' advice, link to local leaders

The Billings School Board has taken a first step toward improving communications with an important segment of our community - business leaders.

Earlier this summer, about 50 local business people were invited to share their thoughts on what the school district's top issues and priorities should be. About two dozen joined Board Chairwoman Kathy Kelker and Trustee Dale Getz at a breakfast meeting, and others submitted comments.

It's no surprise that "getting the community engaged in the dialogue" was the top suggestion for improving Billings Public Schools.

Similarly, the top issue for the district was credibility. Among the comments recorded by the meeting facilitator: "Trustees need to demonstrate that they can effectively lead themselves and the district. Last year's strike (November 2002) has not been cleared up with the community. If you need proof, look at the last two mill levy results. I, for one, will vote no on any new money issue until this board demonstrates that they are in control."

Said another participant: "The perception is that the district can't even take care of what they have, let alone new facilities."

"Work toward forging a stronger relationship between the business community and the schools," a business person advised. "It is not bad now, but it could improve and businesses could make more funding available to the school system."

The School Board directed Superintendent Rod Svee to form a business advisory council whose members would agree to meet three or four times a year for an open discussion with trustees. This is an excellent idea. We commend Kelker, Getz and Trustee Malcolm Goodrich for leading the effort to improve connections with the business community. Like the school, city and county meetings that have commenced in the past year, this business advisory council can only improve SD2's lines of communication with the community.

Trustees need to understand how the larger community perceives our schools and what should be done to improve them.

As Svee said, it's "a marvelous opportunity to gain input, to work towards improvement in communications."

We thank the business leaders who have agreed to serve on the advisory council: Lyle Knight, Monty Wallis, Karen Long, Butch Ott, Todd Buchanan, Bill Underriner and Steve Corning.

School District 2 is a \$100 million public business. The students ultimately will profit when the school leadership stays in touch with local business experts.

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