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Notes for Madeline Novey

One year in, how is Dr. Smyser doing?

We're impressed with Sandra. She has the potential to be a great superintendent for our school district for a long time. She has brought cheerful optimism and proactive energy to her role. Another positive is her general understanding of schools as the ultimate community organizations and the role of the superintendent as a community leader.

Say more about what you mean about the role of schools in the community

Local schools are the quintessential community organizations. When you think community, you think schools. Yet, ironically, school districts can be oddly insular and inward-focused. There are so many stakeholders and requirements and demands on school districts that perhaps that is to be expected.

It was interesting that during the superintendent interview process, Dr. Smyser was the only candidate that really focused on non-school district community members to inquire about their relationship with the district. She was interested in understanding the district within the context of the larger community it serves.

What does our workforce and economy demand from Poudre School District?

Internationally, there is growing competition for good-paying jobs. If our country and area are going to remain economically competitive, we need great performing schools and a well-educated workforce. "Smart places" with a skilled labor force will have an economic advantage in the future.

Arguably, Fort Collins is a smart place with 50 percent of Fort Collins residents older than 25 holding at least a bachelors degree

PSD has a reputation of being a great school district, but I wonder if the evidence supports that. For example, no Fort Collins schools are among 1,000 schools on *Time* magazine's "America's Best High Schools 2012."

Twenty-five Colorado schools are listed but none in Fort Collins. That would seem to indicate that maybe we have good schools, but perhaps not great schools. One thing Dr. Smyser and the board could do is provide a clear-eyed, objective assessment of how PSD is actually performing and put a plan in place to address performance deficiencies. If in fact PSD is a high-performer, that would be wonderful to know. If we can improve in certain areas, that's also great to know.

Is PSD doing what the business community thinks is necessary to get students ready for work jobs out of high school/careers out of college?

Regarding business, I'm not sure there's a consensus in business community about what they need from Poudre School District and how to accomplish it. We want the basics done well, meaning reading, writing and math. Workforce problems we hear about include poor communications and math skills and softer skills like reliability. But I would say that there is a lack of good hard data about the needs and expectations of the business community.

You see a lot of tactical activity by business in schools without strategic context. Many businesspeople are programmatically involved at specific schools but the overall business community is providing little input on curriculum development or other strategic issues. And I don't see a lot of outreach from PSD to systematically and regularly seek input from employers in a way that would inform the curriculum.

What would you like to see Dr. Smyser do?

We'd offer several things.

1. Keep up the good job, keep leading. We love what we're seeing with Dr. Smyser and the board. There is a sense of proactive leadership and energy in the district that is encouraging.
2. Stay strategic. The superintendent and the board are the strategic education leaders of the community. It is absolutely critical that they continue to break away from the routine demands of running the district to ask the big questions like 'Why do we exist?' 'What do students need to know and be able to do to succeed?' 'Do we understand the emerging needs of employers and how is that reflected in our curricula and teaching methodologies?'
3. Demand performance data. Get an independent, objective assessment done of the district's performance. How are we doing? Where are we performing well? What can we improve? Protecting the district's brand is important, but don't let the natural reflex for self-promotion over-ride the need for a good understanding of how the district is doing.

4. Find formal and informal ways to learn from employers. Involve them in advising on the curriculum development process. Informally, regularly visit employers to learn about what they do, how they do it and the skills they need in their workforce. Are students gaining the knowledge and acquiring foundational basic skills necessary to succeed in life? A big part of succeeding in life means being able to support one's self through gainful employment. To that end, the more education officials understand the demands and trends of the modern workplace, the better they can be at preparing students.