

August 2017

Several years ago, I was appointed to the Board of Trustees of the Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System. This was before the days of paperless meetings. Three days prior to the first meeting, I received an overnight package that contained a binder with over 400 pages of information that we would consider. I was beyond overwhelmed. I quickly called a veteran member of the board and asked if he read all of this before the meeting. He told me what the most important parts of the packet were and areas that required less focus. That helped reduce my stress going into the meeting so I didn't appear unprepared. The first meeting was beyond overwhelming, but each meeting that followed allowed me to gain more confidence and a better understanding of what we were talking about.

As a parent of a GPS elementary student, I liken the enrollment process to my progression on the OTRS Board. I was afraid of asking a dumb question. In those early days on the board, I listened and asked questions when I felt comfortable. Soon, I got over the fear of appearing to lack understanding of financial investment policy. Parents who are enrolling their child for the first time can easily be overwhelmed. There are many forms to fill out and proofs of residency that must be submitted. After I went through enrollment as a parent for the first time, I initiated discussions about streamlining the process. Carmen Walters, our Director of Elementary Education, proposed the idea of coming to one site where you could enroll all of your children. As a parent, the idea was very appealing. Last year, we did this for the elementary students. With the success we experienced, we have opened the process to all students in our district. I'm sure there will be challenges but our goal is to make enrolling your child an easier task for parents.

I also wanted to share an update with you about the finances of the district. Many times in this column over the past five years, I've written about negative financial events either on the local or the state level that make it more challenging to provide the best possible education for our students. The Spring of 2016 was the ultimate run of bad financial news. In fact, a presentation I made to all staff members and civic clubs was titled, "The Perfect Storm." Some of the most challenging days of my career were during that period as we cut \$1.5 million out of the budget while maintaining our programs. Some would conclude with that statement that we obviously cut "fat" from the budget. In very few instances would I agree with that statement. The truth is we are functioning with less but teachers having more students in each classroom will eventually produce a negative effect on our outcomes. In the business world, people may or may not care about that scenario. In the education world, those outcomes are called children. I've always believed we have a moral obligation as a society to provide the best for our children so their goals are attainable. We will start this year with essentially a flat budget compared to last year and rising expenses. Fortunately, the cuts last year allowed us to survive. The state budget for this year is relying on revenue derived from some new "fees" that are currently being challenged in the court system. If those fees are found to be unconstitutional, that could signal yet another cut in the middle of a school year.

Regardless of the challenges that are ahead, we are poised to do amazing things in 2017-18. If you are a seasoned parent at enrollment and see someone who looks lost, offer your assistance...we are all in this together for our community. School starts on August 18th and GO JAYS!!!