



Dane County Public Affairs Council

Meeting Summary

September 17, 2008

Dr. Daniel A. Nerad

Superintendent, Madison Metropolitan School District

A video tape of the entire presentation and discussion with Dr. Nerad may be viewed by visiting this internet link: http://www.schoolinfosystem.org/archives/2008/09/madison_superin_10.php

Dan Nerad opened his remarks by stating his commitment to efforts for always continuing change and improvement with the engagement of the community. He outlined four areas of focus on where we are going from here.

1. Funding: must balance district needs and taxpayer needs. He mentioned the referendum to help keep correct programs in place and it will not include “new” things.
2. Strategic Plan: this initiative will formally begin in January 2009 and will involve a large community group process to develop as an ongoing activity.
3. Meet people: going throughout the community to meet people on their own terms. He will carefully listen. He also has ideas.
4. Teaching and learning mission: there are notable weaknesses we need to face head-on. The “achievement gap” is serious. The broader mission not only includes workforce development but also helping students learn to be better people. We have a ‘tale of two school districts’—small numbers of high achievers (including National Merit Scholars), but not doing well with a lot of other students. Low income and minority students are furthest away from standards that must be met. Need to make more transparency with the journey to fix this problem and where we are not good. Must have the help of the community. The focus must be to improve learning for ALL kids, it is a “both/and” proposition with a need to reframe the issue to keep kids moving forward from where they are. Must use best practices in contemporary assessment, curriculum, pedagogy and instructional methods.

Dr. Nerad discussed five areas about which he sees a need for community-wide conversations for how to meet needs in the district.

1. Early learning opportunities: for pre-kindergarten children. A total community commitment needed to prevent the ‘achievement gap’ from widening.
2. High schools: How do we want high schools to be? Need to be more responsive. The curriculum needs to be more career oriented. Need to break down the ‘silos’ between high

- school, tech schools and colleges. Need to help students move through the opportunities differently. The Small Learning Opportunities Grant recently awarded to the district for high schools and with the help of the community will aid the processes for changes in the high schools.
3. School safety: there must be an on-going commitment for changes. What we are doing now is not satisfactory. Nerad cited three areas for development:
 - a. A stronger curriculum helping people relate with other people, their differences and conflicts.
 - b. A response system to safety. Schools must be the safest of sanctuaries for living, learning and development.
 - c. Must make better use of research-based technology that makes sense.
 4. Math curriculum and instruction: Cited the recent Math Task Force Report
 - a. Good news: several recommendations for curriculum, instruction and policies for change.
 - b. Bad news: our students take less math than any other state schools; there are notable differences in the achievement gap.
 5. Fine Arts: Cited recent Fine Arts Task Force Report. Fine arts curriculum and activities in the schools, once a strength, has been whittled away. We must deal with the 'hands of the clock' going forward and develop a closer integration of the schools and community in this area.

Dr. Nerad introduced Mr. Erik Kass, Assistant Superintendent for Business Services who made the following remarks:

1. He is leading the management team in a revisit of the budget model and looking at the financial system; how the district does business; and, how effectively are we spending the money.
2. He will be looking to the city and county for partnerships and shared services
3. His mission with the Board of Education and the public is to present information in ways which ensure that information is accurate, honest, understandable and accessible.

Following are questions and comments from DCPAC members and guests with responses from Dr. Nerad.

1. John Pinto: a) what if the referendum fails? Nerad: engage the community in priorities. He has an idea list of cuts, but is not sure if those are cuts in the right places. b) how to get teachers less into 'politics' and more into school? Nerad: there is a need to separate teachers from politics in the schools. Continuing professional development in teaching and learning and by encouraging new teachers who make teaching their 'first' career choice.
2. Nancy Mistele: a) urged engaging former board members and other community people with historical perspectives, expertise, etc. to offer the district; b) Fund 41 a good idea. Nerad: the benefit of Fund 41 will be to reduce the negative state aid impact on the Madison property tax payers and Fund 80 will reduce the amount of tax authority outside the revenue caps; c) what does it cost to educate a child in this state and what does it cost not to educate children properly? Nerad: The answer to those questions are very complex and involve community priorities and the state legislature engaging in proactive efforts.
3. Don Severson: What are your thoughts and plans for cost/benefits/results analyses of programs and services on both sides of the house—educational and business? Nerad: Outcome assessments should be tied to the strategic plan. He is very much interested in program evaluation—what is the cost and how it is done. He believes application of experimental research methodology for program assessment is questionable.

4. Jonathon Barry: Stated his thanks to Dr. Nerad for his clear enunciation of the issues and directions. Barry remarked about his involvement with the “Fresh Start” program. There are 4000 disconnected youth in our area. Stated that MMSD will not contract with Fresh Start and that the Madison Teachers contract is a barrier to the issue. Nerad: will contact Barry to set up a meeting. He needs to evaluate and determine where the district is with alternative programs. The principals are asking for help. We need more alternatives—it is all about students.
5. Judy Reed: She is the principal of the Dane County Transition School, not associated with MMSD, but believes there also should be a working arrangement. Relationships are the key with the disconnected kids. Asked why does there need to be one dropout? Nerad: will contact Reed to arrange a meeting.
6. Gary Schmerler: Requested consideration for MMSD involvement in the county consortium for charter schools. Nerad: he has asked that MMSD be at the table for this consortium for career-based alternatives. He raised the question for further discussion as to “why do people want charters and how can we be more responsive in the district?”
7. Phil Salkin: Suggested Nerad and others connect with www.wisconsinway@wcgpr.com for a statewide initiative underway to look at funding for education in Wisconsin and how individuals and groups can participate in that effort. He stated it was refreshing to hear about the initiatives for cost analyses, workforce development, etc., but the community and state must provide funding for education.
8. Chan Stroman: Stated that the district and community can’t continue to excuse the problem of school safety fixes until school finance is fixed. She also stated that it does cost more to educate students from low income families and for special needs students.
9. Dave Glomp: Expressed thanks to Nerad as a “breath of fresh air” and for his transparency. Requested the district to address the teacher contract as out of sync with the budget process. Nerad: he will look at all of that. Also stated that teaching needs to be a profession of first choice. There also needs to be more of a balance of male and female teachers at the elementary level.

Final statement by Dr. Nerad: He is committed to keep communications open and the community engaged in the issues and problem resolutions. He urged individuals and the group to communicate with him their suggestions and needs.

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