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JEFFERSON SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT CARD

Readers urge Daeschner, board to seek compromise

THE DISCUSSION

The Courier-Journal assembled a group consisting of teachers, students, a parent, a business leader and a former school board member to discuss the Jefferson County Board of Education and its relationship with Superintendent Stephen Daeschner. Here are excerpts from their conversation, which took place Thursday at the newspaper's offices:

The Courier-Journal: Dr. Daeschner has been here for a short while, and he replaced Don Ingwerson. Have you seen a change in the schools? Do you like the way schools are performing? Do you have problems with the way things are being done for the students?

Bob Schmitt: . . . Managerial styles are changing quite drastically. I have a friend who said we went from the boardroom to the locker room.

I had the opportunity, or dubious distinction, to be on the board when Don Ingwerson was superintendent . . . and I think Don basically ruled from the top down. He basically took all the decision-making out of his staff's hands and made decisions himself. Steve's style is (to) come in and depend on his staff and let them make decisions. What you have is comparable to a new and developing country.

C-J: Under KERA, this board, in particular, has less say in the management of schools and the management of personnel, so they are more removed from what they were able to do in the past. Is that good? Is that bad? Is that a problem?

Dan Clemons: . . . I think what we are seeing in Jefferson County is a real struggle for the school board to find its way. And the law itself is very clear about what they are mandated to do; and there are still individuals on the school board who want to be power brokers and deal-makers and take care of their own schools. And they want to maintain this two-tiered system that presently exists: the rich schools and the poor schools. . . I think that is the heart of the problem with Steve Daeschner and the board, because his vision is very clear in terms of KERA. KERA says all children can learn in schools and public schools must be inclusive. Every school! Not the AP program at Manual or the advance-placement program at another school, but all schools must embrace kids with a variety of learning disabilities, a variety of incomes and a variety of life experiences.

Brent McKim: But that does not seem to be what is happening. We still have schools that are allowed to choose their own students. We still have inequities in terms of funding of different schools. I agree with you. I think that is the answer, but why isn't this happening?

C-J: Let's bring that back around to the superintendent. In your opinion, what do teachers think about Dr. Daeschner?

Diane Price: I have heard few teachers criticize him or his board members. When they do, it normally is when the message has come down to them that they shall do X, Y and Z, and they don't like Y. And maybe (they hear) X, Y and Z and wonder why is that? And the principal tells them, "Because Dr. Daeschner said so." Whether he may have said it or not sometimes has been questionable. . . .

C-J: When you heard about what happened with the superintendent . . . what did you think?

Lisa Forti: I think that he has done a lot of real good things. Like one thing, for example, the new structures of teacher-parent conferences are really good. I really like the way he thinks, especially with that. I do think that the board and the superintendent have had communication problems . . . and have maybe created not necessarily hostility, but had communication lines. And I do think that the most imperative thing to do on a school board is to communicate with the students. I would like to see more of that. I think, in general, Daeschner has done really positive things . . .

David Owen: Leadership style is very different. It is not unlike the transition for business people, where if you look how — I'm using that as an example — if you look at how decision-making was typically administered five to 10 years ago (it was) directive, workers follow directions, very little autonomy (in) decision-making (or) flexibility. That transition is difficult in a business environment. It is not easy for leaders with that leadership style to relinquish decision.

Clemons: . . . I have some strong feelings about Dr. Daeschner. First of all, we can say that he is a fair and honest man. We don't have a problem with this fella who is building houses and having school board employees renovating them for him. He came here, and there is not a pretentious or vindictive bone in his body. I have disagreed with him publicly. I have written a statement and other superintendents would never allow that or tolerate that. . . . I have never been criticized or taken to the carpet over that. Secondly, the man truly cares about kids. That is the kind of person I want leading this district. He has done everything to support the work that I do, the youth services and the family resource centers. He has worked to help bring health-care facilities to our school; he has worked diligently to establish a Neighborhood Place on school property, and . . . these kinds of services are going to help us eliminate the barriers that kids are confronted with.

McKim: I do think that his communication skills aren't what they might be. I know at my school he's come to the site and had very negative, tense and uncomfortable interactions with teachers and also with parents. . . . I know that Tony (Prince) went out to a meeting that occurred in the West End (and) it was a similar kind of situation . . . a very unpleasant situation.

Tony Prince: It got very tense, very quickly. . . . It was with the Kentucky Alliance (more than a year ago) and the issue of tracking came up. . . . I know that (tracking) is a hotter issue politically and racially in an urban district than it would have been in rural Iowa . . . (but) when a question related to tracking came up at that meeting, he became very defensive, and it didn't really lend itself to an open discussion. I agree with Brent; there are some (problems with) communication skills.

Clemons: I think that is strength. I don't know the superintendent well. I don't correspond or talk to him on the phone. I just kind of watch him. And I think there is a breath of fresh air. . . . He wants to listen to people, he's supportive, and he's as common as an old shoe. Now if we want someone who is a cheerleader and glad-hander and someone to beat the drum, we can hire hordes of those.

McKim: But I think you have to be somewhat politic in your discussion, and I don't think getting that tense with parents at a meeting is perhaps the best way. Then again, it has been a while (since that meeting).

Clemons: The other issue that we need to talk about. . . . Change is difficult, and there is still a lot of resistance in this business. . . . You know you look at KERA here, and . . . this is the most massive undertaking and restructuring and realigning of schools in America — ever, ever on record. The growing pains and the bumps and the bruises and trying to empower parents doesn't come easy. . . . When you're new to a district, and you don't know who all the players are, and you're trying to get a feel for it, and you're thrown into . . . you inherit some of the problems with tracking (for example).

Schmitt: . . . The point about tracking — yeah, that should have been addressed 10 years ago, and it never was. There is a paranoia that exists on the school board that if you do away with tracking everybody is going to run to private parochial schools, which is not going to be the case. Do we trade equity for excellence or excellence for equity? . . . It is the proverbial 5,000-pound elephant in your living room. Everybody keeps walking around it all the time, but sooner or later and for the welfare of the school district, it has to be addressed.

C-J: Let's go back to the welfare of the school district. What message do you think the board is trying to send to Dr. Daeschner? That they want him to do something differently, that they want him to leave?

Owen: I think one thing that collectively, frankly, we have assumed or discussed is that a one-year contract equated to not performing; not meeting expectations, vs. a two-year contract that says you have exceeded expectations. I am not sure that is a fair way to characterize this — either fair to the school board or fair to the superintendent. I am concerned from a business perspective, I don't want to see us create two camps, one camp . . . creates a consensus that the school board should revisit its decision vs. the other camp . . . that's not so sure he is doing such a good job.

C-J: That is an important point, but you use the word "characterize," and them's fighting words. Dr. Daeschner himself spoke of it in those terms.

Owen: Yes, he did. That sort of set the tone for discussion.

C-J: Was it on purpose?

Owen: I can't say that.

Price: . . . This year was a very difficult year to get through. He was scorned publicly to the point of . . . I mean, I was surprised that he stayed last year. I think the fact that he stayed proved without a doubt his commitment to Jefferson County Public Schools and his desire to stay in the community.

He is such a competitor in himself, for himself — I think it took everything he had to stay here and jump through the hoops. . . . The school board kept moving on him. Month to month, they were in different places. The second thing is that for a vote of confidence. He needed to know . . . if he was going to have to do this every year for however long the school board allowed him to stay here.

Schmitt: When we recruited Daeschner, what we did was pretty much oversold the district. We've talked about all these wonderful things that this district is and some of those problems and concerns were lying under the surface. Nobody bothered to address those. I remember in 1977 what we brought about in real change came from the business community. Basically a survey done by the Chamber of Commerce said, "Here is what your district is and here is what we recommend," and that forced a real change. . . .

Owen: I think one other concern in the business community is . . . it would be a tremendous destabilizing force for the community, from a business perspective, if a year from now we were searching for a new superintendent. Given the prospects of new business development, given the prospects for recruiting and company development commissions, to have a search committee out searching with a great deal of public record created (that) says you can't please . . . I think that message has been in the paper this week. . . .

The business community has been very closely involved with the superintendent. I have at least monthly discussions with (the superintendent) and regular forums where issues are discussed, including students. . . . From a business community perspective, the superintendent has kept the business community very, very well informed, made great progress.

C-J: If all that is true, then beyond the communication problems, which the board has generally talked about, what is at the root of their displeasure?

Owen: . . . Now the perspective of the school board, I think they're doing their job by saying, "If we have seen — as pointed out a year ago — that there was some weakness, we believe he worked on them. We see new new areas that have surfaced that are in need of additional attention."

That is certainly a school board's prerogative to say, based on the improvements you made in this area, there are some additional areas of emphasis we see surfacing (so) we recommend a one-year extension. I don't see that as a vote of no confidence. I would hate to see us characterize it in the press that way, that this is a no-confidence vote. . . .

C-J: Is it presented that way because Daeschner set it up that way?

Owen: Yes, the man made a comment. . . . I think that if he could revisit that comment in light of how it was played out, I think he might reflect differently. . . . I don't think you will see him unplugging, detaching and becoming unfocused.

Tina Long: . . . I was sitting here thinking maybe it is not so much the superintendent. Just like I changed jobs, I didn't know if this job was going to work out or not, but I felt I had been in this one position too long and maybe (it's that way with) some of the school board members. Not so much that they are not doing a good job, but maybe if you have been in here for eight years, it is time for you to get out.

Clemons: I think we need to find some common ground and put this in a win-win situation. Obviously there are some control issues. I really feel like the board feels like they can't control Stephen Daeschner. He is determined, and he is going to move — even if he moves at a snail's pace, he is going to move forward with these changes. I think he's got to perceive that the glass is half full, rather than half empty. Many of us are under the scrutiny of our jobs on a year-to-year basis, and that should be motivation to get there. None of us are perfect, and I think if he can put it in positive terms, and say we can both win this question, we got to have a balance.

Schmitt: There are certain members of the Jefferson County Board of Education that he is never going to be able to please. . . . I sat through that other evaluation, and I don't know where I had been for a year because it came out and was very negative, but I tried to balance it a little bit. . . . One thing I couldn't figure out at the last evaluation (is that) from the community he gets a favorable rating. . . . I thought, "Who are the board members talking to?"

Price: They say they are talking to the teachers. But it is not what I heard.

Schmitt: Right. You have business community supporting him. You have teachers supporting him. You don't get any adverse comments from the parents and so forth. Where is this thing coming from? I am going back to the agendas of individual school board members. See, we do one thing. We elect people from individual districts. Basically, you have seven individual school districts within one school district. So everybody is out there on their own. I'm for the fact that let's do a districtwide, guaranteed minority representation. At least you can let the whole school system, no goofy magnet programs and traditional schools that are scraping off all the top students from these community schools.

C-J: Let's say it's a year from now and he has decided to move. If he does do that, what will be the impact on the schools?

Price: I think impact is already being felt since Monday. . . . Is he going to leave or what? What does this mean to us? Do we want him to stay, do we not want him to stay? This is just something we did not need to deal with.

Kungu Njuguna: I don't know. I guess the new superintendent comes in . . . and changes everything.

Forti: . . . We were talking about earlier, Daeschner jumping in (and the reaction) "Oh my God: KERA," but you have to realize if someone comes in next year — talk about jumping into the middle of something. Especially if they are coming from out of state. . . . That is something the school board really needs to consider.

Clemons: I think too, that Daeschner has gotten into a Catch-22 situation from the point he got the negative evaluation. Because the negative evaluation has created, I guess you could say, in a sense a lame-duck atmosphere where he was not empowered . . . Because there is a certain skepticism whether if he did get on board with the program, if the school board would approve it because of . . . even if they did, the secondary question (is) would he be around to see it through? So I think that inhibits him (Daeschner) from implementing some of the changes he might otherwise attempt. . . . It is a bad situation and I think probably part of the two-year extension statement was perhaps to get out from under that cloud, get out of that lame-duck situation.

Owen: I don't know what the motive is. If the motive is to create sufficient energy to force the school board to go back and revisit its decision — if that is the motive, you may well be achieving it through the power of the press. . . . If the motive is to acknowledge the strengths and areas that need improvement in the district, then there will be natural collective ownership of that. And I am very confident that is going to bring about the right kind of focus. I go back to the statement Bob made, I'm sure there is probably, not just in our school board but in any community, there are probably school board members whose views, thoughts (and) perspectives are such that you are not going to please . . . you are not going to be perfectly aligned. But if we are in agreement with what our strengths are and we're in agreement on what will be the focus, then you can set about the process of energizing folks on how we can continue to make improvements.

McKim: I think the community would be better off if we were discussing issues rather than personalities. And I think we are getting so bogged. I guess it is a simplified situation, here is this superintendent, here are these board members, watch them. . . . It would be a lot better if we were discussing the tracking issue or if we were discussing what these schools are doing successfully to implement KERA and . . . what were problems. . . . If we were dealing with issues more so than personalities, I think everybody up and down the line would be more empowered to find solutions to the issues, and I will point at the media at some extent. I feel like there is shortcoming on the part of the media because it's simple and easy and irresistible to deal with personalities. . . . I feel like looking at the past 18 months, personalities have been very dominant in the discussions.

C-J: How is this going to affect bringing a new superintendent here after what happened? What is that going to do when it is time to start that search?

Njuguna: I think it will discourage another superintendent from coming in. I mean, he sees the bad criticism that they got and they give him only a year contract when he wanted more. People are not going to want to come in and work with a school board that doesn't seem to work with superintendents very well. I think the impression Daeschner being on a one-year contract — the impression I've got is that it is more personal than what are you doing. It should be about issues, not how you feel about him.

Price: You are certainly right. On the expectations they graded him on or rated him, he met or exceeded expectations.

Owen: I hope he will reflect on that personally and change his feeling about that vote. And I hope similarly the board will spell out the kind of things they would like him to focus on and move forward. . . .

Price: One positive thing that hasn't come up about Daeschner that I think was a remarkable difference from the previous superintendent: When there has been wrongdoing by administrators he has been quick and decisive in the way he has handled it. It has not been kept quiet; it has not been handled behind closed doors. I think that might have cost him politically in certain circles. I think the public perceives it as a positive thing and I think teachers perceive it as a positive thing, but I think that there may be administrators and maybe board members who do not perceive it as a positive thing, and that may be costing politically, which is actually him suffering for something that needed to happen.

Price: I guess one of the things that bothers me the most is that he has continuously been berated publicly and privately for being who he is. I mean, the man — we all talked about him being open and honest — well, that was one of the things that brought him here. He is a shirt-sleeved kind of guy that says, "None of us can be smarter than all of us" and "Because I am superintendent doesn't mean I'm God and have all the answers." Well, our past superintendent would have never done anything like that. The point being this: Well, he came in that way. We hired him that way. A year ago I said he is no different than when we hired him. . . . And he has changed somewhat. I can see changes in him that had to be deliberate. Part of that is learning to control his temper. He is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get guy; he doesn't hold favorites and doesn't play the political game.

Price: What bothers me the most is that it seems to me we brought him here and we sold him a bill of goods. I was on the search committee that did the visits. . . . Well, (for) the association, he was No. 3 for us. We wanted this person and this person and then him. And you know the reason why? Because we interviewed him two times, once in person and once over the telephone. We asked him the same questions over the telephone that he answered "wrong" a few hours before, and guess what — he answered them "wrong" the second time. He didn't change his answer, thinking, "Oh, I bet I didn't answer that right a couple of hours ago. I think I will say it this way."

Long: That's why I think the board . . . is probably wanting someone whose string they can pull: "When I say jump, you say how high." . . . To me, the few times that I have met him — spoke with him once — he seems like the kind of person I could invite to my house and he wouldn't care that I didn't have nice china. He could just sit right down with the paper plates, you know. But I really do feel he is a kid kind of person. . . .

Njuguna: Is that the kind of superintendent we want? . . . He was open in his job and we don't want that now.

Prince: And if each board member is holding one of the puppet strings, and they're all pulling in different directions, the puppet couldn't do what they wanted anyway.

C-J: What should happen?

Forti: I can't answer that. But I really think now he is going to be working tremendously hard, and I personally really hope that the board members start getting more positive and optimistic. We can do this. We can work together. We can compromise. . . . I think there should be a compromise, and I think communication lines, maybe they need to work on that, but . . . we need to work issue by issue here. And if it means opening up communication lines — really working with the board, SBDMs (site-based decision-making councils), students — that is what needs to happen. I think everybody needs to keep in mind that we are doing this for the students who are in the school, who we are producing this generation, you know, bright, articulate and involved young leaders. And I think that is what we need to focus on, and not alienate parents, students and teachers who are directly affecting those students' lives every day.

I think there needs to be a compromise and everybody needs to work together.

THE PANEL

KUNGU NJUGUNA, senior, duPont Manual High School, Courier-Journal High School Roundtable

BRENT MCKIM, teacher, Manual High School

DIANE PRICE, president, Jefferson County Teachers Association

DAN CLEMONS, coordinator, Fairdale High School youth service center

DAVID OWEN, Vice president, corporate and external affairs, BellSouth

TINA LONG, parent of Lincoln Elementary student

TONY PRINCE, teacher, Waggener High School

BOB SCHMITT, former school board member; area manager, Emler Distributing Co.

LISA FORTI, junior, Atherton High School; Courier-Journal High School Roundtable

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