Superintendent's Report

October 22nd, 2010

LEARNING UPDATE

- **Creating a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list** – In our continual effort to think about our own practice as learning environment leaders, the district leadership team has begun a journey of reflecting upon our base knowledge around our learning model known as *Learning to Learn.* To assist us in this work, we have begun to develop an FAQ on Learning to Learn so others can gain an awareness of how it supports students by thinking differently about how we create more engaging, or self-motivating learning environments. But more importantly it is a way for us to organize our own thinking on this topic. Since we have started to complete board member – superintendent learning walks where we have had an opportunity to think more deeply about the model and what it looks like in practice, I thought I would share this draft FAQ information with you. I welcome your perspective and whether or not it effectively communicates what we are working on and its importance. Please let me know what you are thinking. We see this effort as an ongoing process as new questions arise, the list can be expanded. Below are five initial questions we started with. FYI.

Learning To Learn Frequently Asked Questions

1) **How will the district's learning model help students do well on state exams?**
   Response: We're convinced the district's learning model we call Learning to Learn will help students do better on state tests because the focus is to support students to become ever-stronger thinkers rather than simply just knowers of the information that might be on a test. We believe one of the greatest downfalls of high stakes testing is that it forces students and teachers to focus more on a narrow band of knowledge around a single measure rather than using a wide range of content as the fuel for learning to think. In other words, we see the content as a means to an end rather than the end itself. Turning students into biological file cabinets of knowledge just to pass a high stakes test is the exact opposite to what we are working to accomplish within the Learning to Learn concept.
2) **Does this mean that the "process" of learning is more important than content?**
   Response: No. Content is absolutely critical because learners must gain a solid and wide awareness of, and comfort with using all essential content. Our board's Ends policies clearly expect this and it is what we are working hard every day to achieve. With that said, how we use the content within the district's learning model is the fundamental difference between a learning to learn classroom and a traditional content delivery classroom. A learning to learn classroom focuses on supporting students to become independent thinkers. Without the use of strong content, what is there for students to think about or explore as learners? In the process of becoming ever-stronger thinkers and learners, student's content knowledge expands as part of their work rather than as the only purpose of their work as students.
3) **How do *Learning to Learn Classrooms* promote thinking?**

Response: Traditional learning environments are essentially content driven. What often results in these types of classrooms is that the most efficient methods of transferring content are usually employed. This content delivery model typically follows a teach what must be taught, provide an activity to deepen understanding and then test to make sure students have retained the content. We believe this process encourages a "memorize, regurgitate and forget" cycle that for many students only causes them to learn how to endure the experience. This ultimately causes students to dislike school rather than love learning, which should be our ultimate goal in education. In our district, we are blessed to have a strong team of educators who work every day to fight the "know the content" pressure and harness the "utilize the content" energy. Everyday our teachers strive to help our students become better thinkers. Put another way, our teachers are focused on helping students become self-directed learners for a lifetime. Even with this goal in mind, without a comprehensive framework for shaping our collective work, it is easy to slip into the "teaching to know" mindset and miss the opportunity the "learning to think" mindset can offer. The district's learning model helps us stay anchored in this work by grounding our practice in what we believe are the three key elements of a learning to learn classroom that are applicable across the district regardless of grade level or subject area. This unified learning framework invites teamwork by teachers because as learners themselves, they strive to become better thinkers too and therefore want to use the same learning conditions within their own learning efforts. Their learning about their practice as an educator is therefore focused on providing a high quality, self-motivating learning environment for their students rather than simply on delivering the content of their respective subject areas.

4) **What are the three conditions for creating a learning to learn classroom?**
Response: The district's learning model centers on maximizing three learning conditions within the classroom: 1) Flow of Information; 2) Cognitive Demand; and 3) Learning Trust. The *Flow of Information* (FoI) is a look into how information is being exchanged within the learning environment. The main point here is that traditional classrooms are very teacher centered (most efficient way to deliver content). By contrast, a learning to learn classroom is strongly student centered where the teacher facilitates a wide range of information around the students rather than being the central provider. The second condition is *Cognitive Demand* (CD), which is built on what is known as Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy distinguishes between six levels of mental or cognitive work: Knowledge, Understanding, Application, Analysis, Evaluation and Creating. The first three (Knowledge, Understanding, Application) are considered low cognitive demand efforts. The last three (Analysis, Evaluation and Creating) are considered high cognitive demand efforts. Low cognitive demand learning is rooted in efforts to "know" the content. High cognitive demand learning assists in efforts to learn to "think" using the content. The third and most important learning condition of a learning to learn classroom is known as *Learning Trust* (LT). The foundation of learning trust is built upon the belief that every human being has an innate need and desire to learn. Learning is part of our human spirit or our DNA so to speak. When learners are not exhibiting the energy behind this human need to learn, learning trust based problem solving lets us consider the variables within the learning environment (led by the teacher) that are controllable by the teacher. Without this firm belief we all have an innate need to learn,

it's easy to let our problem-solving energies move into a blame mode set in or around either the student and/or the conditions (i.e. parents, home life, economics, etc.) outside of the teacher's control.

5) **What if, as a teacher, I already use cooperative groups in my classroom? How is the district learning model different?**
Response: Cooperative learning strategies can be very powerful at increasing the flow of information within a classroom moving it towards a more student centered rather than teacher centered classroom. With that said, failing to design into each lesson high cognitive demand targets, activities and assessments and/or not building from a strong learning trust platform often produces limited meaningful learning opportunities for students even if a teacher is using thoughtful cooperative learning strategies within his or her classroom. We believe that all three conditions must be considered as part of effective lesson planning in order to maximize students' internal energy for learning.

BOARD UPDATE

- **LCEF Energy Shift** – The La Center Educational Foundation is beginning to have a shift of energy away from trying to tackle the high school stadium project as one huge project and more towards thinking of it in terms of phases. I also understand they are also thinking about joining forces with other school groups such as the music association and the booster club to have greater synergy. I will keep you informed of their work as it progresses and I learn more, but I remain supportive and pleased with their consistent energy. FYI.
- **Appreciation Survey** – An educational consultant named Kathy Hagler has been working with the Clark County Skills Center regarding their movement towards Policy Governance. As a member of the executive committee, I have been involved in this conversation for a couple of years now and have been assisting them in this work. Kathy has been very appreciative of the assistance and has offered to spend a day in our district completing what is called an Appreciation Survey. She has done this at the Skills Center and I was very impressed with what she learned from the students in the process. She will be in the district to complete a similar survey by talking with groups of students across the district similarly to your linkage meetings. I will provide more information about this as it develops, but the information gained from our students should give us a glimpse into their perspectives on their learning environments. P.S. - Kathy is doing this work for FREE as a way of saying thanks for our support of her and her work with Policy Governance at the Skills Center. We definitely like FREE☺
- **Administrative Realignment Reflection** – As we wrap up our second month of school, I have taken some time to reflect upon the administrative realignment we made for this school year. To start off, I don't think I could ask any more than what Dave Holmes has provided in his new position as assistant superintendent for teaching and learning. His leadership with providing learning environments for teachers (LCP Summer Institutes in August – 55 staff trained), substitute training as per board policy EL-3 (8) (28 substitutes trained), volunteer training regarding the district learning model (150+ participants to date and counting), classified support staff inservice (12 trained to date), parent awareness evenings on drug and

alcohol issues (50+ participants) and internet safety (scheduled for November 18th) along with grants, testing and curricular work in social studies and health. Finally, Dave is also working to re-energize our CTE program that as a high school principal found difficult to spend the necessary time to redesign. This work is now underway and should be very exciting to see the results in the months and years ahead. He is without question laying the groundwork for many positive results to come. Kudos to Dave. Moving on, as the new high school principal, Carol's work is changing the conversation amongst the high school staff around topics ranging from instruction, learning, school spirit and team work that are creating an opportunity for staff to rethink why and how they are creating the types of high quality learning environments necessary to meet the board's Ends. Dave did a great job as high school principal, yet a shift in thinking and perspective with new leadership can be a great opportunity to recommit to what is working and rethink what could be done differently. Carol is loving this new challenge and I feel real positive about the high school team's energy around this work. Scott (elementary principal) and Bonnie (elementary associate principal) are also tackling their new roles with great energy and positive impact. Just as with Carol at the high school, new leadership with some different thinking has resulted in the opportunity to recommit and/or rethink the collective practices of staff. The elementary team's effort around teaming (implementation of the expert model), their work on building-wide character themes (appreciation, commitment, etc.) is part of their new "Paw-sitive" Learning Environment initiative this year, which is very exciting to be part of. I am proud of Scott and Bonnie's efforts to support and lead this collective effort by our elementary staff. All in all, I believe the administrative realignments have served us well and the energy amongst the leadership team is stronger than ever.

I think that is all for now. Please give me a call if you have any questions. Talk with you later.

Mark