

“THINKING BIG!” OR “WHAT WAS I THINKING?”

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Since I was a 9th grader at tiny Neoga, Illinois High School and appealed directly to the school board on an issue that impacted me personally, I have held tight to the notion of someday serving as a member of a local school board. That someday became reality over the past year as I took the leap and got myself elected to the Pearland, Texas ISD Board of Trustees. As I suppose is likely true of most newly hatched politicians, I had big plans to change the world, or at least my children’s school district, ASAP. As I will outline for you in this brief article, however, this experience has, if anything, changed me much more so than vice versa.

My first hint that my perceptions, however well-studied I might have considered them to be, were inaccurate, came when I spent a very tiring 10 hour day being oriented to the job by our district’s superintendent. As she was herself relatively new to her own position and I was her first orient-ee (read guinea pig), she wanted to be thorough. In retrospect, two full eight-hour days might not have been unreasonable, given the scope of what she felt I needed to know (read her account of this process at *reference*). I began the day driving a school bus (even without the screaming kids it’s a big chore), spoke with all assistant superintendents and department heads, and ended with an extensive tour of our numerous ongoing construction projects (we’re a rapidly growing district—more about that later). I learned about the extensive time commitment of school board service shortly thereafter, as I spent an entire (beautiful) spring Saturday cooped up indoors in a workshop meeting that didn’t even recess for lunch.

My introduction to the well-worn maxim that “you can’t please all the people all the time” came the very evening I was sworn in as a new member. Within 10 minutes of realizing my long-time dream of serving on a school board, I cast a vote that has followed me to this very

day. For some time prior to my joining the group, the possibility of a simplified (and therefore more stringent) dress code for students had been discussed among the superintendent (both the current and previous occupants of the position) and school board. While not always a front-burner issue during the preceding two years, the subject had been debated at length, both publicly and privately. During the candidate forums leading up to the election, I had unambiguously and emphatically voiced my support for such a move, and when the time came I proudly cast what I naively thought would be a very popular vote in favor of a new dress code. The backlash was quick and sharp. It did not matter that (as we have since come to appreciate) a large (though mostly silent) majority of the district's patrons did indeed support our action; I now understand only too well that even the smallest opposition group, if organized, vocal and (most importantly) media-savvy can make life miserable. For the first time in my life, I came to dread calls from the media, and cringed every time I opened the local paper to the Op/Ed section for fear of what might have been written about my board colleagues or I. There are times in life when sticking to one's principles and not taking the easy way out are critically important; this was, I believe, one such instance. Though calm has for the most part returned, I am still accosted regularly in public to respond to "...one quick question." Close on the heels of the opening of school last fall (which, interestingly, opened without the mass protests against the dress code we had been warned to expect) the board called a bond election to finance the building of three new schools in our rapidly-growing district. Thankfully, it passed by an almost 2 to 1 margin, but not without efforts on the part of our dress code opponents to defeat the issue. During the current school year we have also successfully completed a re-zoning of attendance zones within the district and weathered an incident where non-students came onto one of our campuses and fired shots (into the air, thankfully) in the general direction of the school. Perhaps my biggest

revelation this first year has been simply the size and scope of what goes on in a district of even the relatively moderate size of Pearland ISD. It became apparent to me very early in my term that there was no place for parochialism in my approach to board service; I love the campuses my own children have attended, but every child in the district deserves consideration, not just mine, and all of our 12 campuses need attention, not just the five where my kids have gone.

My payoff for persevering comes in small doses, like just the other day when a neighbor came up to me at a community function and told me how much it had meant to her family that the board had shown the fortitude to stick with our decision to implement a dress code in the face of such a withering attack. I am also heartened by the amazing support of my wife and children; last summer I reached a low point when I thought perhaps I should simply walk away (after all, I reasoned, I hadn't bargained for the kinds of dehumanizing written and verbal assaults that were being flung at me). In my weakest moment, when I informed them of what I might wish to do, my two older children scolded me for even thinking such thoughts; it was then that I knew beyond doubt that the job was worth doing, since it was clear my children understood just how important it is to cling tightly to one's principles!

For a person who thought he always wanted to be a school board member, and who considered himself pretty much wise to the ways of the world, I can now freely admit that there was a whole lot I did not (and still don't know) about both schools and life. If you value serenity and a steady unchanging routine, and if desire to live in peace and harmony at all times, then I'm not certain I can recommend a school board term to you. If, on the other hand, your goals in life include public service, role-modeling for your children, and just generally leaving your comfort zone to learn and facilitate learning for others, then I can highly recommend this job. I know I'm loving it!