

The Poore Page

October 2011

One of my favorite words is the word “passion.” It is a word that has driven me in all that I do. From family, to work, to how I choose to try to conduct how I live my life. I cannot tell you enough what great passion I have to be a part of all of you and to be in NW Arkansas. The opportunity to be in a community that so values education but also has values that endorse health and fitness, community activism, and family values is as refreshing as it gets. It is easy to see why so many people upon moving to our community cannot think of a better place to spend the rest of their lives.

Passion should drive us but it should also drive us to never forget what our core should be about. Often we can get so wrapped around something we are passionate about that we develop tunnel vision in our approach. Of course, there has been much passion ignited in our community regarding how we handle our high school growth issue. I think much of the intensity of the argument comes from the fact that we actually had two quality options from which to choose. Both options were very attractive and certainly individuals gravitated towards one option that they thought would best meet the needs of their family or an option that they thought best matched up with the direction that they hoped the community would go.

I had hoped to never use the Poore Page so directly to discuss a school issue but felt that if ever there was the need for such action this was probably the time and that I need to share my thoughts on this issue. Most of my comments are not new, they are comments that have been a part of conversations I have had with individuals, with groups, and in Board meetings. Simply put, I do believe that the 9th Grade Center is the best option for handling our growth. The most important factor in this recommendation is that it provides us the best opportunity to impact instruction, curriculum delivery and ultimately academic achievement. We have some of the highest performing students and schools in the state. I do not believe anyone in Bentonville is satisfied with this being our one moniker. Instead, I believe this community seeks to be one of the best school districts in the nation and there is quantifiable proof to show that to be the case.

The 9th Grade Center provides us the best chance to deliver a world class education to all of our students. Some of you have started to hear about our unique delivery with this model. It ties the business community, higher education, our staff, and most importantly our students together to solve real problems, to collaborate with each other and with others throughout this state and even throughout this nation.

Research can be found to prove any point. But one research statistic I will share that I believe to be true is that no matter what the size of the school is you can have great schools or very poor schools and the size of these sites can vary from 500 students, to 1500 students to over

4000 students. The Bill Gates Foundation recently abandoned an effort to create smaller learning environments in school settings because the dollars they were investing in this effort were not making impacts on achievement as he and others had hoped. What research does state is that the 9th grade year is the most critical year for our high school students. If they are not engaged, supported, and provided skill sets, they can quickly become at-risk. Our 9th Grade Center model captures a way to impact the three indicators of engagement, support and skill sets.

Finally, this decision was not made in isolation. First, it had to be vetted by our experts. Boy, do we have some experts in this district. I would put our principals up against any in the nation and my secondary folks- Kim Garrett (Bentonville High), Kathy Murry (Washington Jr. H.S.) and Jonathon Guthrie (Lincoln Jr. H.S.) all endorse this concept and believe it provides us the best means forward to impact achievement. I could go on explaining the support of others, but in some ways it would devalue the passion of others. We know we have citizens and business people that are passionate about this 9th grade center but truth be told we also have citizens and business people that are equally passionate about a second high school.

So, where does this leave us? Do we abandon an idea or not vote for an option because our choice did not get selected? What would folks say if the idea had gone the other way and supporters of the 9th Grade Center shared that they would campaign against passage of a second high school? Does passion drive us so hard that the opportunity we have to impact our community and our children prevent us from working together to move forward? There is no perfect option but what I do know is we have a community that can work through about darn near anything. I look forward to my work with all of you on continuing to make Bentonville Schools a world-class education system.