

To: Superintendent Donna Hargens
Jefferson County Board of Education

From: David A. Jones, Jr.
Member, JCBE

Re: **Takeaways from NSBA**

Date: April 25, 2016

From Friday, April 8 thru Monday, April 11, I attended in my capacity as JCBE member the National School Boards Association's annual conference in Boston, MA. The purpose of this note is to summarize what I heard and learned from the many presentations and discussions I attended with school board members and education experts from around the country. I would be happy to discuss further with any of you more specific elements of the sessions. In many cases a copy of the presentation document or supporting materials is also available via the conference app.

Sessions

Overview of the new federal "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA), presented by NSBA legislative counsel

ESSA gives states and local boards more authority, but JCPS and Kentucky will have to work to figure it out. For example, the presentation suggested the possibility that JCBE could choose a different accountability system from KY's by selecting a system used by multiple other states.

Recruiting, Preparing and Retaining the Next Generation of Urban Educators

Across the nation, recruiting and retaining teachers is tough and getting tougher. Factors cited include strengthening of the economy, dissatisfaction with job pressures ranging from high stakes testing to student behavior, and failure of teacher training programs and alternative certification programs to prepare teachers for the actual work of today's classroom teachers. Specifically noted as missing was adequate training in the competencies needed for teaching children of color and in poverty.

Possible action items for us: (1) Review how many teachers JCPS has hired as of April 26 board meeting to fill the predictable 400+ vacancies in teacher workforce at the opening of 2016-17 school year? How many principal vacancies exist now and are predicted, and where are we in filling them? (2) Create discussion forum with key educators of JCPS teachers (U of L, Bellarmine, Spalding, etc.) to review how we are doing, individually and collectively, on communicating system needs and preparing teachers to succeed in meeting them?

"Soft Skills": Deeper Learning, Alternative Assessment, Creativity, Capacities & Dispositions

I attended several sessions in this zone of practice, which seems to be a hot topic nationwide. Most presenters and attendees (board members from across the nation) took as a given the narrow test-driven framework in which schools have been operating is not producing the people our society and economy need.

"Most Likely to Succeed" documentary and panel discussion

Described as "the best film ever done on the topic of school -- both its past and its future" (and previously viewed by me and a number of JCPS stakeholders at the Louisville Free Public Library), the film explores how old fashioned structures and techniques, combined with the narrowness of standardized testing, has made schools boring for students and teachers alike -- and shows an alternative vision in an exciting high school built around project-based learning. Idea: We should show this movie to JCPS constituencies.

Assessing Creativity and 21st Century Skills

Staying with the theme of enlivening our schools while teaching the capacities and dispositions called for in our Vision 2020 strategy, I heard board members and superintendents from three districts across the country, along with a self-described “non-profit PLC focused on teaching and assessing creativity” called EdLeader21 -- describe how they define and assess creativity/deeper learning. Summary: JCPS does not have to reinvent the wheel here; others have developed and are using rubrics, training teachers and principals, and achieving success in the pathways we’ve chosen to start following.

Tony Wagner, closing presentation

Harvard professor of education, who was featured in the documentary described above and is familiar to many JCPS stakeholders from his writings, TED talks and appearance a couple years ago at Louisville’s IdeaFestival, spoke eloquently on the theme that stuck in my mind as: OUR SCHOOLS ARE BORING, BUT DON'T HAVE TO STAY THAT WAY!

Bringing the Key Work of School Boards to Life by Using the Baldrige Excellence Framework

Another issue on which I focused was how districts drive IMPLEMENTATION of their strategies and goals – which I think is the big challenge facing JCPS not that we’ve defined our goals. This session was the best, as it described the 13-year journey of Stoughton Area School District in MA from (in the words of the Superintendent) “I had no clue about how to define, map or think about processes” to a 2013 Baldrige award. One key point, loosely in presenter’s words: “Board members have a right to expect explanation of level, trend and context in all reports” from District staff. Good goal.

More broadly, this and other sessions left me acutely aware of our need for a framework against which to execute, and assess achievement of, Vision 2020.

Purple Penguins and Icebergs: The Slippery Slope of Social Media, Trolls and Going Viral

I went to several sessions on this topic featuring board members and superintendents from large districts explaining how they manage the speed of digital media and the free-for-all of social media. This was good, and certainly the best-named. Bottom line: All big districts are struggling to stay focused in the face of unpredictable story-line emergence. Heard wide range of ideas related to creating new fora for public input and discussion, managing the cost of massive ORR via charging for staff time above specified cost-per-search (\$20,000), and the importance of board-Superintendent cohesion in the face unpredictably viral inaccuracies or taken-out-of-context information.

Board Members Leading Courageous Conversations About Race and Equity In Your District

This was the best of several sessions that focused on equity. Gist was a challenge to school board members to empower and protect principals and teachers in taking on the challenges of serving black and brown students better. This language was part of the presenter’s point: There is no such thing as “majority minority”; the majority of students in big districts are black and brown, and the mostly white educator ranks have to serve these students better. Boards must track, teach and talk directly to racial issues; name and measure progress toward goals for these students, and refuse to tolerate pockets of resistance within districts, e.g. schools where principals welcome teachers who fail to upgrade their cultural competency.