

Superintendent's Corner

"Channel 4 concerns addressed locally"

On Monday evening, Channel 4 television carried an investigative report on various board and administrative expenses in the Jordan and Canyons School Districts in the Salt Lake Valley. Most residents of Utah are aware of several issues created as a result of the recent division of the Jordan School District that created the Canyons School District. Funding comparisons between the two districts was a major news story throughout the 2010 legislative session. In response to the funding issues, a reporter from Channel 4 spent time in both districts attempting to identify where funds were being spent.

The concerns expressed during that segment of the news focused on certain expenditures for the board of education and the superintendents in both districts in the areas of attendance at conferences, cost of hotels, cell phones, home internet access, and meals. The reporter was quick to acknowledge that the total cost of these items wasn't significant given the total budget of those school districts, but the public perception was a major concern.

When a news story such as this is televised, there is a tendency for people to generalize the information to every school district and thus we become suspect through association. Given this tendency, I wanted to take this opportunity to address the same issues in our school district.

Attendance at Conferences

National conferences are a great way to gain information and a different perspective on various aspects of education. The National School Boards Association provides a great conference each year. There are also a number of regional conferences that also provide good opportunities for learning.

During the thirteen years I've been in the district, we've had one school board member attend one national conference. A couple of years ago, we had a board member attend the American Association of School Administrators Conference. He was recognized for his outstanding career as a public educator. There were several thousand administrators in attendance. Over the years, board members have discussed the possibility of attending a conference periodically but money and time have always been an obstacle.

Our board does participate in the annual convention of the Utah School Boards Association in Salt Lake City. The district pays for the conference expenses although board members are required to pay for any additional expenses associated with the attendance of their spouse.

My contract provides me with an opportunity to attend a national conference each year. In thirteen years, I've traveled out of state twice for conferences that were paid for by the district. As an officer in the Utah Superintendents Association, I've also attended a conference paid for by that organization and will attend another one later this month. Every other year, I do participate in a national conference that is held in Salt Lake City. Our administrative team also attends this conference.

As with the board, when my wife goes with me, I pay her expenses.

Meals

When we hold a work session before a board meeting, the district provides members of the board with either snacks or a meal. If a meal is provided, it usually comes from either Subway or Deb's Spicy Pie. The district does pay for the meals of our board members, as well as all others in attendance, our new teacher breakfast in the fall, and our retirement/recognition dinner in the spring.

Most of the meals at the USBA Conference are included with the registration fee. The board does attend a regional meeting in Brigham City approximately three times a year. The Utah School Boards Association provides the meal.

I seldom claim reimbursement for a meal, but when I do it is controlled by the same per-diem regulations that are in place for all of our employees.

Cell Phones/Internet Access

The district does not provide cell phones or home internet access for members of the school board as reported in the Jordan School District. The district does provide me with a cell phone as well as a handful of administrators who are considered on call 24/7, year around.

The district has provided one board member with a FAX machine. The district does not pay for home internet access for school board members or administrators.

Cost of Hotel Rooms

Many of our board members do stay overnight at the Little America Hotel during the USBA Conference. The district pays for a base room. If a board member wants to stay in the "tower", they pay for the difference in the cost of the room.

I'm also cautious about the cost of hotel rooms whenever I'm required to be away from the district.

Summary

Our organization is committed to focusing all of the resources we can directly into the classrooms where learning and teaching occur. That requires us to be extremely frugal in expenditures outside of the classroom. Each school district is different and has a responsibility to be accountable to their constituents. Given the nature of Monday's news, I did feel it was important for us to respond to the story in order to answer questions that our readers might have.