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Summer school for board members held in Bend

Conference offers insight on cyberbullying, poverty in schools



(Thinkstock)

Unlike some other elected positions, school board members often are not polished politicians.

For many, joining a school board is the first dip into the waters of public service — which at times can be choppy. The Oregon School Boards Association, an organization that serves a variety of types of school boards, offers training, assistance in superintendent searches, legal and financial services, advocates for state and federal legislation and helps volunteer school board members navigate their roles, in effect sometimes throwing them a life jacket.

For the past few years, the association has held its annual summer conference in Bend. This year's conference, held at the Riverhouse on the Deschutes on Friday through Sunday, welcomed more than 260 attendees,

including a few local school board members, from the Redmond, Sisters and Crook County districts, according to Alex Pulaski, OSBA communications director.

The conference offered a variety of workshops through the weekend, with sessions for newcomers, covering basic roles and responsibilities, to more in-depth subjects such as addressing poverty in schools.

In that workshop, host William Parrett, director of the Center for School Improvement & Policy Studies and an education professor at Boise State University, laid out lessons from his book, “Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools.”

While there’s not a direct causal line linking relationships between students and staff and higher achievement, students do better when they can trust staff, and that happens through relationship-building, Parrett said.

The goal for high-poverty schools should be to create healthy, safe and supportive learning environments, he said. It’s important for adults in a school — including teachers, principals and other staff — to rethink the stereotypes of poverty they may have developed in their heads.

If a student feels as if she belongs in school, she is more likely to succeed. Too often, children in poverty feel like they don’t belong at school, Parrett said, for a variety of reasons.

One attendee raised a hand to share what one middle school had done to keep kids in poverty from feeling singled out: At that middle school, kids served hot lunch from the cafeteria were viewed differently by their peers because they may qualify for free or reduced lunches. Families who could

afford it usually packed cold lunches for their students. So the school began serving cafeteria lunches in brown sacks so students couldn't tell the difference.

Parrett said beyond building relationships, it's important to make sure high-poverty schools aren't "dumbing down" what they teach students, and that they should keep expectations high.

Walt Wagner, a Crook County School Board member, attended Parrett's session on poverty. Wagner said while he and fellow board members are highly aware of the poverty that exists in their school district, it's an ongoing learning process figuring out how to best help those kids.

Many school board members and administrators never experienced poverty themselves, he said, so it gives them a different perspective. But Wagner knows it firsthand: He was raised in poverty in Clackamas County.

A couple of key relationships with adults at school helped encourage him.

Wagner said he was looking forward to learning more about charter schools at the conference, but he also attended a session on cyberbullying Saturday afternoon.

In that workshop, Haley Percell, an attorney with OSBA, and Rachel Fleenor, a marketing strategist for the association, discussed how to prevent cyberbullying, how to address it in schools and how to keep students and staff safe.

Cyberbullying is any type of defamation, intimidation or harassment that occurs over an electronic communication device, Fleenor said.

Cyberbullying, which often occurs on social media, is prevalent, she said, adding that it can be tough for schools to keep up with all of the platforms students use.

In some cases, when students have been disciplined for cyberbullying, they have argued that the punishment infringes on their freedom of speech, Percell explained.

“We are always weighing competing rights,” Percell said. Students and staff have the right to be safe and undiscriminated at school, but in some cases, judges have ruled it was within a student’s First Amendment right to make a post online.

Percell said educating students ahead of an incident about practicing good “digital citizenry” is key. Students should also know to speak up to school staff when they see or hear of an incident happening online that is affecting a peer. Then when an incident does occur, Percell said, quickly responding and communicating is a school district’s best bet.

Percell gave a number of examples where school board members came to her asking for help on how to respond to cyberbullying. In most cases, she advises that schools notify parents and students of the complaint, meet with the student and parent, request the student remove the post, explain school policies and consequences, follow up in writing to the person who complained about the cyberbullying and consider disciplining the student involved.

Something Fleenor reminded attendees not to do: Respond to the incident on social media.

“Take it offline,” she said.

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