

Setting Higher Standards To Make A Dream Come True

Patricia Evans Newby, Ed.D., became the first female superintendent for Grand Rapids Public Schools in July, 1997. Dr. Newby immediately went to work on preparing and promoting one of the most ambitious bond issues in the history of Michigan. Throughout her 36 years in education, Newby, 58, has worked with diverse populations in urban, suburban and rural community settings as a teacher, principal and administrator.

Following are excerpts from a recent interview with Colleagues:

Q. What is your most important role as superintendent for the second largest school district in Michigan?

A. I see myself as an educational leader, an instructional leader, a liaison to the community and a member of the community. There are some fundraising issues or getting additional financial support for the district. All of those are integral aspects to the position, but instructional leadership is my primary role. It is the ultimate job in any school system.

Q. How has your background prepared you for this role?

A. The diverse populations that I've worked with helped prepare me for Grand Rapids. I've had a lot of experience with reconfiguring schools or reorganizing schools by putting a plan together for individual schools and allowing each school to analyze the needs of the community and implement the types of programs that will meet those needs.

Q. What is the key to overcoming the adversity along the way?

A. Most of it is making sure people have the information they need and working with them and changing their attitudes so they believe it can be done and by setting higher expectations all along the line. For staff. For students. For parents. One of the adversities is inadequate resources. You have to identify the most important needs and shift those resources if needed.

Q. What is the most valuable lesson you've learned on your way to becoming superintendent of Grand Rapids Public Schools?

A. To work with people to ensure that people feel comfortable talking to me and know that I will talk to them.

Q. Your achievements make you a role model for others. How important is it to have role models?

A. It's very important to me. I had role models. I had mentors. I had them when I was in grade school, when I was in high school, when I was in college and when I started my career. There are several people I really credit with pushing me — for literally pushing me out of the nest to make me fly. I can't put myself as a role model; others have to recognize me as role model. If they do, I hope they see in me somebody who has worked hard and tries to do what's right.

Q. GRPS is attempting to pass an ambitious \$396 million bond issue on March 31 that has been pared down by almost \$200 million (\$580 million) from original estimates. Why so much at one time?

A. Our buildings and facilities have not had any massive infusion for a very, very long time, and all of our facilities need some additional support, whether it's technology or structural remodeling. Education has changed each year, and the longer we wait the worse off we will be. When all of the schools need infusion, which schools can you afford to ignore? Which children are the ones that will miss out? If we spread it out over a number of different bond proposals over a number of different years, that's when choices will have to be made. All of our children are deserving of the kinds of things that we're talking about. All children should have the opportunity to learn science the way it should be learned or be able to interact with

technology. Technology is here and it is becoming more and more essential for us to be able to utilize it. It's not an option any more. Our kids deserve to have better instructional advisors in areas of technology. Our teachers will utilize different strategies to make this happen.

Q. How great are the needs for your district?

A. The greatest need is to secure the adequate resources to support the instructional purposes. By doing that, we will rebuild the confidence of the community. My role is to go out and begin a process to make these connections with the community.

Q. How will this type of funding affect educators, from teachers to administrators?

A. All of the things we're asking for are at the school level. It will give teachers the facilities to support the kind of instruction that they are being held responsible for. We currently do not have that. Students are not getting the art/music education they need, because the facilities won't allow it. The teachers will have an opportunity to teach in an atmosphere more conducive to learning. The buildings in some of our rooms now have just one electrical outlet and an electric clock. That goes back to the 1930s technology. There are only so many outlets on an extension cord.

Q. What are the reasons you expect this to pass and has the district done anything unique or different to convince those who are going to fund it (voters)?

A. The reason I believe it will pass is because every community within Grand Rapids is going to be affected by it. The community value is raised by the nature of the school in it. Every school has something in this bond proposal. We go school by school working with that community to define the objectives that best fit those needs. The rest of the community needs to recognize how the whole community will benefit. The property values will increase as we improve schools. And along with that, we will improve instruction.

Q. What kind of pressure is there to get this bond issue passed?

A. The pressure comes from the fact that we know that any delays will cause our students not to have what they deserve. Because of its size, we're going out to the community and asking for more than we ever have before, but we believe that the students deserve it, the city deserves it and the whole metropolitan area deserves it. Of course we feel pressure. There's a lot of pressure and a lot of work, and we're going to work hard.

Q. What happens if it doesn't pass?

A. I'm not even thinking about that. I believe it is going to pass. This is something that this community has been involved in; it started 14 months before I came here. Most people coming into this type of job would not want something this massive when they come in, but I have committed everything in my power to get this passed. It is very important to the school system, to the superintendent and to the Board of Education that it passes. We're going to do everything we can to make sure it happens.

