

By Bill Husfelt

Superintendent, Bay District Schools

Someone wise once said, "Perfection is God's business – we are human." That axiom rings so very true for me as the Superintendent of Bay District Schools.

BDS is, in essence, a little city with more than 26,000 "citizens" when you combine our student and staff populations. And like any little city with this many moving parts, things go wrong every day. But since we work with our community's most precious commodity, our children, those accidents/mistakes/oversights often get magnified or amplified.

And while I understand that, it's sometimes disheartening to see one person's mistakes as headline news when 99.9 percent of our students and employees strive to do what's correct and sound every day.

And so I thought I'd use this opportunity this week to talk about what our "city" undertakes each day to help others gain a little perspective on our day-to-day operations. When you deal in the volume of processes that we do, the odds are that ONE process/person/piece of equipment will not function as planned on any given day but in our world, that ONE is the ONE that makes the news even though everything else is running smoothly. I'm hoping a little glimpse into the "rest of the story" will help you put that ONE into perspective.

MAINTENANCE

For example, we want our entire community to be proud of our schools and buildings where our students learn each day. But we have more than 411 individual school buildings and 160 portable buildings of various ages (some date back to the 1950s). That means, on any given day, there are roofs to repair, walls to sheetrock, doors to rehang and other routine maintenance issues.

Our maintenance team does a phenomenal job of taking care of these situations, and our facilities team is right there to back them up with outside contractors as needed. But, again, just as older homes need lots of repairs, our schools also need lots of repairs. Maintenance issues don't mean we're not doing our best to take care of what we have; they are expected when you consider the usage our buildings and grounds experience.

We want to do our best to make our buildings available to community organizations and others who need large gathering spaces but that additional use also contributes to wear and tear on the buildings and we have to be mindful of that.

FOOD SERVICE

Likewise, there are inevitable complaints about meals served at schools as well. And sometimes those complaints are valid, like the situation we ran into last year with our milk vendor. We investigated concerns shared with us, determined them to be accurate and ended our relationship with a vendor who couldn't meet our quality standards. But, in the grand scheme of things, we also need to note that Chartwells serves in excess of 16,000 meals daily, which puts them way above most local restaurants. And so, just as when you go out for lunch or dinner at an area eatery, sometimes things don't go as planned in the delivery of those meals. We definitely want to hear your concerns and we investigate

them all fully but we also want you to consider the magnitude of the tasks that face Chartwells every day and understand that every meal may not be as perfect as we wish it was. The Federal guidelines that govern what they can serve, how they can serve it and how much of it they can serve are just mind-boggling to most of us ... so trust me, it's a LOT more complicated than you think.

TRANSPORTATION

Our bus drivers drive more than 6,000 miles PER DAY, transporting more than 7,100 students to and from school. With 92 active routes (and 111 buses in the fleet), inevitably, traffic snarls, buses run late, engines break down, drivers call in sick, and other complications occur. We expect all of our drivers to do their best to uphold our high safety standards, and I am pleased to note that they do that. Does that mean that they are all perfect? No, none of us are perfect, but they are all doing the very best job they can in some highly challenging circumstances.

Like businesses across the country, we've faced hiring shortages and we've recently brought in higher than usual numbers of new employees. And I am grateful for all of them but they need support and encouragement, not criticism, as they learn new positions and skills.

With a pick-up and a drop-off every morning and another in the afternoon, we have about 28,000 opportunities (7,000-plus students times four) every single day for things to go well and for something to go wrong. It only takes ONE student dropped off in the wrong location for the entire system to look bad regardless of the 27,999 pick-ups and drop-offs that went well.

Again, the bar is high and I am not saying we accept less than someone's best. But, to be candid, we've all made mistakes as new employees and we've all learned from them. Our employees deserve the same opportunities while understanding that they are under the scrutiny of the public and our expectations are high.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Likewise, with 3,884-plus employees, Bay District Schools is one of the largest employers in our community. And, again, it's inevitable that employees make mistakes and sometimes even say things they regret. The difference is that our employees don't have the luxury of making mistakes in private. If we're being honest, we've all said things we regret, and we've all done things we regret. Fortunately, most of us have been able to learn from our mistakes in private (and not on the news), and we've grown from those experiences.

Public school employees are not as fortunate. Because the bar is so high, and the expectations so all-encompassing, our mistakes become news fodder almost immediately. And these days, that means the social media keyboard commandoes immediately kick into gear. Because all of us went to school, it seems all of us have firm opinions about how schools should be run. I'm not saying for one minute that I don't expect our employees to do their very best each day – I certainly do – but with more than 3,884 human beings hard at work with more than 22,000 students, things will not always go as planned.

So I ask our community members to remember that. And to trust that all of us want the best for our students and each other and that we're human and perfection is out of our grasp. We know our parents and guardians want us to show grace and compassion to students when they make mistakes and we ask the same for our employees.

Speaking of those 22,000 students, we know things are also challenging for them. We're averaging 105 discipline referrals daily – that's a FORTY-TWO PERCENT increase over last year. Our students have faced immense challenges since Hurricane Michael and the pandemic, we know this for sure, and we're committed to helping them learn to follow the rules and meet the expectations for appropriate behavior at school.

At the same time, however, we're not going to tolerate behavior that endangers others because we know you want our schools to be safe places for teaching and learning. There has never been more emphasis placed on student safety than there is currently, and with good reason, so please rest assured that ANYTHING that threatens student safety is going to be addressed swiftly and appropriately.

AIR CONDITIONING

And finally, there was a lot in the news recently about an air conditioning unit that wasn't working as well as it could have been in a local high school classroom. We obviously don't want any students or staff in a classroom without a working air conditioner; we always do everything possible to offer relocation options for those dealing with ac issues.

But did you know that our district has more than 3,000 individual HVAC units? So, it's expected that at least one will malfunction on any given day and sometimes more than one. Our HVAC technicians are experts at what they do and regularly call local companies to help complete work orders. Still, recent national supply chain issues have complicated the repair process for everyone, and we're sometimes unable to fix things as quickly as we have in the past.

If you've tried to order a repair part for an appliance lately, or worse tried to actually order a replacement appliance, you know what the supply chain issues have done to what used to be routine purchases. At one point, a part we needed for an a/c project was on back order for six months. Another time we chased a replacement part only to discover that there was literally ONE available in our whole state. And that one part went to someone who was willing and able to pay above the market price for that item – that's not something we can, or want to, do. And so we wait.

I hope this perspective helps you consider our district differently when things aren't running as smoothly as we'd all like. I know that I can speak for every single employee when I tell you that we're committed to doing the very best job possible for your students and that we value your trust, partnership and encouragement.

Not a day goes by that I am not thankful for the opportunity to work with such an incredible team of passionate, dedicated people. I hope you'll take a minute this week to thank the BDS employees you know because they all deserve our appreciation.

Stay safe and God Bless!