

# State of the District Address

## January 18, 2010

Broken Bow Board of Education, Faculty, Staff, Administration, Students, Parents, Patrons, and other interested persons, I present my 10<sup>th</sup> Annual State of the District Address.

### **Overview**

The State of the District address is that one time of the year we collectively step back from the hustle and bustle of our daily school activities and peek at the future through the lens of the past year's glasses. While this peek is through my glasses, it is a worthwhile exercise for the district in that this is the one opportunity for me to communicate directly to all interested parties without the refraction of other venues.

Certainly, there is neither the time nor the wherewithal to capture each and every significant historical event of the past year or frame every issue in front of us, but my endeavor with this address is to capture the essence of each so that you have a more complete overview of where we've been and where we are going.

As I stated in last year's address, the basic framework for this endeavor is to review the positive developments of the past year and project those against the challenges of the next year. Positive developments within this address are framed in terms of those steps that moved our team towards a generally accepted state of improvement while the challenges are those issues which, while not necessarily completely blocking attainment of established goals, do in some way impede the movement toward those goals. Today's address will focus in some detail on two culminating events from the past year that have been years in the making, and briefly touch on familiar issues that remain challenges as we look forward.

### **Culminating Events**

One caveat. Today's address is somewhat different in format than previous addresses. Today's address is a multimedia presentation. But, before we start, I need to tell you a story which explains the multimedia nature of tonight's address.

My wife had to replace her cell phone. It's a nice unit, one that has many more features than I think necessary. One day while retrieving it for her, I noticed the display screen indicated she had a multimedia message. Never having received a multimedia message myself, I asked her what that meant. It turned out that she had a text message with a photograph attached. I was expecting more.

I tell you this story so that you are not expecting more, as I was, when you learn that today's address is a multimedia message – a 21<sup>st</sup> century way of saying I have a speech and a video to show you.

The problem with the attached video is that people reading this message on-line or in some other textual format will not have the background regarding AdvancEd provided in the

video. Therefore, I will briefly encapsulate the video in this text, which will be redundant for the people in today's audience.

## **AdvancEd**

Just last month, Broken Bow Public Schools underwent a thorough examination by a 6-member team of educational experts from across the State. This review, called the Quality Assurance Review (QAR), is conducted in five-year cycles under the auspices of the North Central Association (NCA) which since 2006 is an accrediting division of AdvancEd.

AdvancEd is the world's largest education community composed of 27,000 public and private schools and districts worldwide, located in 65 countries, and responsible for the education of 15 million students.

To understand what an undertaking this accreditation process entails, I provide the following information as described in the AdvancEd literature.

To earn AdvancEd accreditation, schools must:

1. Meet seven standards which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for schools to achieve in quality student performance and organizational effectiveness;
2. Engage in continuous improvement by establishing a continuous improvement vision, constructing profiles which maintain a vigorous description of all students and their performance, and constructing profiles of school effectiveness;
3. Develop the plan for interventions to improve student performance; and finally,
4. Document the results to provide the basis for the next cycle of accreditation.

Although the faculty was present at the exit briefing, which you saw today as the video, this is the first official announcement of our indicator ratings. The indicators on the seven AdvancEd standards were not released until the QAR report was approved by the national reader. I received these indicators just last Monday.

I will utilize the following methodology for reviewing each standard. First, I will give the standard and its explanation. Second, I will give highlights of the narrative for each standard. And lastly, I will give the indicator for that standard.

Indicators are the ratings, or grades if you will, assigned to convey the attainment or functional level at which the standard is performed. The indicators basically stand for high passing, passing, low passing, and failing marks. The high pass indicator is termed highly functional and means the school had evidence indicating practices and procedures fully integrated and effectively and consistently implemented. The pass indicator term is operational and means the school had evidence indicating practices and procedures are actively implemented. Emerging Practice indicator term stands for low pass and means that the school has evidence indicating early or preliminary stages of implementation. Not evident is the indicator for failing, or no pass marks which means little or no evidence exists.

### *Standard 1. Vision and Purpose*

The school establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school.

*“Each Child Matters. Every Day Counts.* Broken Bow Schools unified its mission statement into two sentences – making it easily identified, simply stated, and powerfully implemented.”

So begins the narrative of Standard 1. The narrative concludes by noting the following strengths: all teaching and learning decisions are aligned with the mission and purpose; a family atmosphere encourages faculty and staff to remain at the school; and the school demonstrates a clear focus.

The indicator assigned to Standard 1 is operational.

### *Standard 2. Governance and Leadership*

The school provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and school effectiveness.

Shared leadership exemplifies the district. The Board of Education, administration, and staff display clearly defined roles, demonstrate collaborative effort, and respect the role each plays in the success of the district. Particular strengths of the district are: participation in continuous school improvement is an expectation; there is a strong, knowledgeable administrative team whose members support each other; and, the administration fosters leadership among the staff.

The indicator assigned to Standard 2 is highly functional.

### *Standard 3. Teaching and Learning*

The school provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Selected highlights of the narrative include: ...a systematic plan which promotes teacher collaboration through school-wide committee assignments; proven, research-based instructional practices to enhance student learning and achievement are implemented by the faculty, particularly evident in the district-wide training in APL strategies; and the standards-based grading system and its impact on students.

The indicator assigned to Standard 3 is highly functional.

### *Standard 4. Documenting and Using Results*

The school enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and school effectiveness.

A particular highlight in the narrative of standard 4 is: Through an analysis of achievement data..programs (were implemented) such as writing across the curriculum, character education, standards-based grading, and the eLearn initiative (and) are..examples of the school using data to improve student performance. Results of these efforts show a marked improvement in student writing, student responsibility, and a focus on educating the “whole child.”

The indicator assigned to Standard 4 is operational.

*Standard 5. Resource and Support Systems*

The school has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

The narrative for Standard 5 can be summarized by the following statement, “This structure provides sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables all students to achieve expectations for student learning.

The indicator assigned to Standard 5 is highly functional.

*Standard 6. Stakeholder Communications and Relationships*

The school fosters communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

The school strives to involve stakeholders and to keep them informed of activities, opportunities, and issues. Stakeholder groups in general feel that the school does an excellent job of educating the “whole student,” especially in the area of character development. However, stakeholders are generally not familiar with the continuous school improvement process.

The indicator assigned to Standard 6 is operational.

*Standard 7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement*

The school establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

A climate of continuous school improvement is pervasive at Broken Bow Schools. Students and their success—academic, social, and behavioral, are clearly at the heart of the school’s continuous school improvement efforts.

The indicator assigned to Standard 7 is highly functional.

This completes the rating on the seven standards. Some inquiring minds may be wondering why I spent so much time on this report.

The reason? *This Is What We Do.*

There is no more comprehensive, thorough report about Broken Bow Schools published anywhere than what I just spent 10 minutes or so summarizing.

There are other reports. The Nebraska Department of Education, and at an ever increasing level, the United States Education Department, require us to submit report after report with which they create tables and charts. However, those reports deal with numbers, they don't reflect the commitment to students, to excellence, to community, and to professionalism that is reflected in the comprehensive evaluation of the Quality Assurance Review. You and I have every reason to be proud of the work our education professionals do.

Just one more thing before we proceed. For those of you who like to keep score, Broken Bow Schools received a highly functional rating in four of the seven standards. I understand that four highly functional rating indicators is exceptionally unusual: A more typical result would be possibly one, and on rare occasion, two highly functional ratings. Never four. Also, as you heard in the presentation by Ms. Jindra, she recommends Broken Bow become involved in training other schools in our model through the AdvancEd Peer-to-Peer process.

I salute the Board, faculty, staff, and administration for achieving this lofty stature.

### **eLearn**

If you will recall from last year's address, I reviewed the history of technology at Broken Bow Schools. I think it is instructive to review that history again because it illustrates the long-term commitment to our mission, *Each Child Matters, Every Day Counts*.

In 1995-96, Broken Bow Schools had 175 desktop computers and one IBM System 36 mid-size mainframe computer with 4 dedicated computer terminals for office use and 20 dedicated student terminals in two student computer labs, one each at the High School and Middle School. There was no computer or telephone conductivity between and among the buildings. The district had one teacher assigned for 2 class periods a day to keep the 175 desktop units (organized into 3 separate local area networks) and the 24 dedicated terminals on the System 36 and associated hardware (e.g. modems and printers) operating. Neither dollars nor time was devoted to provide training for teachers on how to utilize this equipment in any form, let alone in instructional methods.

By the start of the 1998-99 school year, Broken Bow Schools created the position of Technology Coordinator, eliminated the high maintenance IBM System 36, networked all the desktop computers (and inter-school telephone communication) in all the buildings into a fiber-optic network, and implemented a teacher training program that required all teachers at Broken Bow Schools to take 45 hours of standards-based instruction on how to make a computer a tool of instruction, as opposed to the object of instruction.

We were the envy of many schools. Our students from Kindergarten through their senior year were learning technology applications to assist their learning in ways of which most schools our size only dreamed.

Once again we have within our sights a new step in technological attainment to aid our instructional efforts. Only this time we are playing catch-up; the expectations on our students as they enter post-secondary educational institutions often requires a much more advanced technological background than what we currently provide our students.

When our students go off to higher educational endeavors, not only do they still have to overcome the typical trials of being far away from home and learning their way through and about new surroundings, which as many can attest is challenging enough, but often times our students have to learn a whole new paradigm regarding the college or university's use of technology. In its basic form, in this new paradigm students enroll in classes, receive class assignments, communicate with professors and classmates, conduct research and do their homework, turn in class assignments, and receive their grades and comments from professors: All on the computer. And this is not optional.

Students graduating from Broken Bow and moving on to higher academic pursuits, no matter their academic preparation, start behind the eight-ball in competition with their fellow students.

We can move our graduates from this woeful starting position by implementing a 1:1 computing initiative.

In hindsight, those were heady days in the late 1990's and early 2000's. Little did we know we were the General Motors of the digital world. While at one point we were on the cutting edge, we didn't keep pace.

About 5 years ago, we started hearing about schools issuing personal laptop computers to students. Some schools in Custer County were among the first in the State of Nebraska to adopt this innovative practice. At Broken Bow, this initiative was viewed as an untested, expensive practice. We wanted to observe for awhile to make sure that the actual results of the practice lived up to its promises.

The Technology Committee of our school improvement team then embarked on a lengthy investigation on how best to use what others were already doing with this practice and examine the prospects for any additional components that would help our students in the digital world.

The experiences at Arnold and Anselmo-Merna Schools, as-well-as other 1:1 districts visited, indicated that this initiative had legs.

Two factors surfaced during this investigation: Survey results and new funding sources.

Exiting Broken Bow Seniors indicated on the survey they complete following their Senior year that they were no longer well prepared with a strong foundation in the use of technology. The ratings dropped from a high of 100% of exiting seniors who rated their foundation as excellent or average in 2004 to 76% in 2009. Another way of looking at the

results is that in 2004, 0% rated the foundation as below average and in 2009, 24% rated their foundation in technology as below average.

In terms of new funding sources, the Nebraska Legislature created a new allowance that required the funds to be expended in a manner that closed the achievement gaps between students of poverty and students of means. By providing a level playing field in terms of access to technology, a major step could be taken to close that gap.

These factors, along with the advances in internet filtering and learning management systems helped the Technology Committee formulate a program we know as the Broken Bow eLearn Initiative.

eLearn rolled out in September 2009, with great anticipation. And, we learned all over again what General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said is absolute, "Plans are worthless, Planning is essential." The rollout had its problems. However, since we had the planning teams already in place, the plans were adapted to the current situations and solutions were developed. Still, with the changes implemented from those original plans, this initiative is broad in scope and powerful in practice and the ultimate focus of eLearn remains unchanged.

From the Broken Bow Public Schools website, the best encapsulation yet written explains eLearn:

eLearn is the Broken Bow Public School's "Technology-Infused Learning" initiative. Students in schools that offer this kind of program receive a laptop computer for their use throughout the school year. The laptop remains in their possession 24/7, whether they are at school or not, a concept often described as "anywhere anytime learning." Class participation at school requires all students in the class to have a school-issued laptop, and instructors are trained to use teaching methods that make extensive use of them. Students have a sense of personal ownership of the laptop, unlike the computers in classrooms and computer labs at school. In the Broken Bow Public Schools, Juniors and Seniors (and a few Sophomores who participate in Junior/Senior-level classes) participate in the program.

Technology-Infused Learning goes far beyond the mere issuance of a laptop computer to students, however. The laptop is only a tool to access an enlarged and revitalized world of learning. Students are expected to take more personal responsibility for their learning process, much as they will need to do when they attend college. Along with the laptop computers, students are provided with a rich environment for interaction with other students, instructors, information sources and learning scenarios such as discussion groups, blogs, journals, wikis, and collaborative photo and document libraries that are only available on the Internet's World Wide Web.

It doesn't stop there. Broken Bow Schools was recently informed that a grant written by Mr. Ken Kujath, Secondary Principal was funded to add up to 30 additional laptops to eLearn. These computers will be assigned to Mr. Miller's science classes.

Once again, Broken Bow Schools is back to where it once was, at the vanguard of student learning.

### **Familiar Challenges**

The accomplishments are grand, but I do want briefly to mention the changing face of State and Federal involvement in public education and end with the intimately familiar facilities issues.

### **Mandates and Money**

I see a developing scenario involving the increasing involvement of the State and Federal Governments as a 'fact of life', something that I will describe in more detail in the facilities issues section. Therefore, since this growing involvement is a fact of life and must be accepted, it serves no real purpose to enumerate the involvement here. I just want to mention the development so that you can monitor the situation.

The perfect storm has developed and as we so often hear in our winter weather forecasts, something to the effect of, ..."Snowfall amounts will be determined by the actual track of the low-pressure system...", it depends on the actual track of the various proposals working through the political surface map of Nebraska as to what will actually happen.

One possible track of the storm system is the *Race to the Top* grant. The State of Nebraska just submitted an application for *Race to the Top* funds, the latest and greatest venture into local control of public schools devised by politicians yet. In terms of money, it may be viewed as a good move. It ostensibly will bring untold riches to the education coffers for the State of Nebraska. Riches that could effectively forestall our toppling off the cliff we are nearing in terms of stimulus funding scheduled to end next year and the strained Nebraska economy. The problem is, that at this time, more and more control of local schools is moving not only to Lincoln, but on to Washington, DC as well.

I want to share just one tidbit to demonstrate the State and Federal level of involvement in the *Race to the Top*: Should a school be designated as an under-performing school, the principal of that school will be removed. No appeal. No deal. Just Washington, DC, in concert with the State of Nebraska, dictating who works in our local schools.

A second possible track for the storm is that Nebraska doesn't receive *Race to the Top* funding. With the struggling state economy, projections of state tax receipts remain depressed into 2012. Educational funding normally provided through state tax receipts was replaced this year with Federal stimulus money. The stimulus money is projected to account for approximately 11% of state aid funding this year, fiscal year 2009-2010 and next, 2010-11. The stimulus money is scheduled to sunset on June 30, 2011. I suggest that based on what I read happening to schools in other states, the times ahead in Nebraska, without *Race to the Top* funding, are grim.

Follow closely the storm track.

## **Facilities**

Our facilities remain a challenge for our community. Looking back, we started the process of addressing the facilities issues in January of 2006 and we are no closer now to having a solution to them than we were four years ago. And, we have the additional problem (what a nice problem to have) of growing student enrollments and a lack of space.

The facilities issues aren't going to go away. Just because the last major effort went down to an overwhelming defeat in the failed bond election, doesn't mean the facilities problems ceased to exist—it just means that particular solution wasn't embraced by the community.

Fred Smith is cited in John C. Maxwell's book, Failing Forward, as saying "...the key to positive action is to know the difference between a problem and a fact of life. A problem is something that can be solved. A fact of life is something that must be accepted."

Our facilities are a problem. The facilities problem can be solved. The existence of opposition, for whatever reason, from tax increases, to location, to design, to a bond issue is a fact of life.

Facilities are a problem—a problem that can be solved. They can be solved in a manner in which we have pride or they can be solved in a haphazard manner which may result in what so euphemistically once was described as a trailer park.

This community is at a facility crossroads, which path will it take?

## **Conclusion**

In this lengthy multimedia address, I've expounded on two of the most major systemic accomplishments of Broken Bow Schools in my 15 years as superintendent. The AdvancEd external review results are something to write home about. The eLearn initiative into technology-infused learning is breathtaking in terms of your commitment to student learning. Broken Bow, be proud. You have much to be proud of. The problems, by definition, can be solved. However, no one can solve them but us: Let's do it.

As I ended last year, I also close this year: Ad Astra Per Aspra: To the stars through difficulty.