



## Boards Making a Difference

### With a Change in Leadership on the Horizon, the Independence School Board Relies on its Strong Foundation to Continue the Momentum

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Since Superintendent Jean Peterson came to Independence Community Schools, the board has worked hard to become a unified team. This hard work built a solid foundation that, even with a transition in leadership looming, will hold strong.

“I’ve felt like I’ve had a great board the last eight years. The board members have been responsive to the community and really understood their role—they act as a whole board, not individually. I’ve been really lucky,” said Peterson.

Peterson announced her retirement in September 2017, giving nearly a year’s notice. With this gift of time, the board embraced the opportunity to plan ahead and find the best candidate for the job. They have been actively involved in the superintendent search, from start to finish. The board conducted a work session to identify characteristics and traits that they wanted to continue, as well as aspects they were looking for in new leadership. Following the work session, they sent a survey to staff and community members, asking for input on what the new superintendent should bring to the table.

“We were able to identify and align what the board perceived, with what the community perceived. It just reaffirmed what the board’s direction was going to be,” said Board Vice President Brian Eddy.

Even more important than the board’s engagement in the search for the new superintendent is the strong



framework in place that will enable the important work to continue, without setbacks and challenges some divided boards face.

So, how did the board achieve its unity and create a strong framework? Through a commitment to develop and adhere to clear board goals, a focus on student achievement, and dedication to board learning.

## DEVELOPING CLEAR BOARD GOALS

On the path toward becoming a unified board, they completed two IASB board workshops early on—goal-setting and board roles and responsibilities. Peterson said, “They were really a reminder of board responsibilities, policies for chain of command and communication. We’d had some turnover in board members and needed something that would be professional learning for the old and new board together.”

Through the goal-setting workshop, the board determined priorities, goals and action steps.

### **Independence Board Goals:**

1. Obtaining and Sustaining Academic Excellence
2. Responsibly Manage Fiscal Resources
3. Strengthen Communications
4. Maintain a Long Term Facility Plan
5. Create an Exemplary Activities Department

“We had board goals previously, but they weren’t definable. They were outdated. We needed to establish specific action plans and benchmarks, so we came up with an elaborate spreadsheet that shows steps to accomplish each goal, resources needed and the outcome we want to achieve,” said Eddy.

Since the initial workshops, the board has continued to work diligently toward the goals and action steps, and takes time to review them each year. Additionally, they’ve had multiple work sessions on budget planning and long-range fiscal planning.

“From these workshops and work sessions, we’ve become a unified team. We may not always agree on things, but once the decision is made, we’re a united front,” said Peterson.

## FOCUS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

“Student achievement is a given in our culture and our mindset. It’s what we’re here for. We strive to use taxpayer dollars responsibly, and we feel that they want our students to be prepared for the workforce. Our local businesses want people they can hire. That means we have to ensure students are successful when they graduate.”

The first board goal is “Obtaining and Sustaining Academic Excellence”. Part of the work toward this goal includes hiring administrators and curriculum directors who are continually looking at student achievement. The board relies on the recommendations and research brought forth by these experts, and expects them to come forward with ideas on how to further improve student achievement.

“What do we need to do as leaders of the district to further support teachers in their quest toward student achievement? The recommendations we hear at the board table are spot on. While sometimes it may challenge me a bit that the recommendation costs more money--I know that it’s been thoroughly researched. We aren’t just throwing money at something, and we need to offer the best programs possible for our students,” said Smith.

Administrators, educators and curriculum directors present, discuss and analyze student achievement data with the board on a regular basis. Additionally, the district conducts a senior exit survey asking them to rate their education—one year out, then five years out. Each month, a different school building is highlighted through a presentation involving teachers and students discussing a program or initiative.

## DEDICATION TO BOARD LEARNING

The board learned that effective board members do more than show up once a month at the board meeting. In addition to the initial goal-setting and roles and responsibilities workshops, they regularly attend professional development, including the IASB Annual Convention.

“It’s critical for us to make good decisions for our students. We are constantly learning, equipping ourselves to make good decisions at the board table,” said Smith.

This dedication to board learning won’t end once Peterson walks out the door—incoming superintendent Russ Reiter feels strongly that professional development is an integral part of board/superintendent work.

“Learning together as a board and superintendent really helps everyone get on the same page. I don’t want to hide anything, as the superintendent, and the board expects me to fulfill what is best for their district and students. Learning together allows for open communications, shows that we’re open as a board. It also helps build trust and relationships,” said Reiter.

## LOOKING AHEAD TO NEW LEADERSHIP

With Peterson’s retirement slated for July 1, the board has turned its attention to the new superintendent and its hopes and expectations for new leadership.

“We’re really looking forward to Russ getting out into our community, talking with small business owners and parents. He is coming in with a fresh perspective and may be able to identify some things we may have overlooked. What are those opportunities we aren’t capitalizing on? How can we make those community connections so students feel engaged and see the benefit of their education?” said Smith.

The board is ready to get Russ up to speed on student achievement progress, so that the important work can continue.

“He has to understand where we’ve been, where we’re at, and where we want to go. We need to ensure he understands our board goals and our expectations. Then we can have those deeper conversations and determine what’s next,” said Eddy.

[\*\*Meet the Independence School Board\*\*](#)