

# Efforts of staff invaluable as district reaches for excellence

In 1961, John Garner, often described with reverence as an uncommon American, published his first major book, titled *Excellence*. He argued that the United States must strive for excellence and equality at every level of society.

This caught the attention of President John F. Kennedy, and Gardner became involved in federal efforts to improve education and in the profound change that took place in society, culture and politics.

A quote from his 1961 book brings to mind a current-day reality:

"We don't even know what skills may be needed in the years ahead. That is why we must train our young people in the fundamental fields of

knowledge, and equip them to understand and cope with change. That is why we must give them the critical qualities of mind and durable qualities of character that will serve them in the circumstances we cannot even now predict."

Over the past 18 months, I have found myself wanting to know everything I could about this district, the staff, the students and the community. I've talked with staff members, parents, other adults and children. I've participated in activities and I've asked numerous questions. My questions have become a tool for connecting one piece of information to another.

Input without action leads to stagnation. Information in any quantity becomes quality

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*"Absolute excellence ... is doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. It inspires us to strive for more, raise the standards and demand the best."*

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information only through analysis and reflection. It is the result of purposeful and deep analysis and reflection that visions are created. It is through the collaborative support and efforts of many that these visions become reality.

## From good to great

I find myself repeating the same questions in my mind. Where are we? Where do we want to be? How can

we, as an organization, move from good to great? How do we define excellence? If we truly believe that we are inspired by excellence, should we expect or accept anything but absolute excellence?

Worthington has placed a high value on education since the community was founded more than 200 years ago. Based on everything I've heard, quality in the Worthington schools is best defined through two

things: superior academic achievement and unshakable community trust. Sounds simple, but what does that look like?

All of our students must be proficient in the fundamental academic competencies. Whether we like it or not, these have been defined for us in federal laws and state standards. Our students, our schools and our district are measured on our compliance and progress. It is not negotiable.

To reach absolute excellence, we must sustain the growth of our best learners, while at the same time, provide expert instruction for those who are struggling.

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**Melissa  
Conrath**  
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## EFFORTS

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We must expand opportunities and provide a concentrated and laser-like focus on the progress of the kids who need it most.

For our students, it will be through this work – a high level of preparation in reading, writing, math, science, history and the arts – that will be necessary to a secure and fulfilling life. Every

one of our students deserves such an opportunity.

Our community is more culturally and socioeconomically diverse than in any time in our history. Students come to us with learning, language and lifestyle needs that we've never seen before. The methods we've used in the past may not work. We simply cannot and will not accept leaving any student behind in our pur-

suit of excellence.

The best education for all – not motivated by a state report card score or an AYP rating, but by a civic duty and a moral responsibility – is a sign of absolute excellence. We must make sure our curriculum is aligned to the standards, that we understand and prioritize the skills we must teach and that we think deeply about the ways we teach and our children learn.

### We are what we do

Aristotle promoted the notion that, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." For our students to excel, we must help them develop the habits of success. We must focus on the critical qualities of the mind and the durable qualities of character that they will need in their years ahead. This takes teachers with passion, dedication, persistence and talent. These are teachers who can

make a difference and will have an impact.

We know the world is getting smaller but the challenges larger. To be successful, our students need to extend beyond the fundamental skills and we must help them develop a hunger for learning, a passion for ideas and a moral compass. To think creatively, to think analytically, to solve problems, to demonstrate creativity and innovation, collaboration, ethical behavior and social responsibility have never been more important.

Absolute excellence means we must pay careful attention to the quality of current and future district staff. We must recognize the challenges in recruiting and retaining new employees and we must deal with both the abundance and scarcity of candidates to fill our po-

sitions. We must compete for the best and brightest and once they are here, we must help each one continue to grow. Furthermore, we must do everything we can to assure that our expert teachers stay in the profession and stay in our district. Research indicates that qualified, trained and expert staff members are the most important school resources.

Each effort by each individual in this district, whether a student, teacher, administrator, bus driver, secretary, classroom assistant, food service worker, custodian or coach, can build upon one another. Positive actions and efforts to build trust can have a ripple effect. Strong schools affect property values, the quality of life in a community, and most importantly the advancement of knowledge among all individuals.

The impact we can have is truly exponential.

### Mantra of excellence

Absolute excellence serves as a mantra and a measuring stick. It defines the attitude of the members of this school district. It is doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. It inspires us to strive for more, raise the standards and demand the best. It means no excuses.

Exponential impact speaks to the limitlessness of the impact each individual can have on the lives of others. We can reach for the sun and the stars.

Are we there? No, not yet. But I encourage you to join me in this continuous pursuit of absolute excellence.

*Melissa Conrath is superintendent of the Worthington City School District.*