Supporting the best interests of children: An interview with Ann Levett
July 1, 2019

Earlier this year, I was fortunate to attend an education conference in Savannah, Georgia. One of the guest speakers at the meeting was Dr. Ann Levett, Savannah native and now superintendent of the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS). Dr. Levett impressed all of us with her candor, her deep sense of history and her commitment to the students and families she serves. She was kind enough to answer some questions from me about her work as an educator and a community leader.

1. As a Savannah native, can you share your thoughts on what it means for you to be “back home” running a large, complex school system?

I have a deep sense of pride about this accomplishment. Never in my earlier life would I have imagined I would be superintendent in the school system that I grew up in and worked in for the early part of my career. Superintendents are often brought in from outside sources, so being selected to lead our school district is truly an honor.

2. Your education and career took you to many places, and you have taught and been a leader in both K-12 and higher education. Are there any common themes that you have seen in your experiences, especially as it relates to at-risk or underserved populations?

I have often witnessed a common theme of low expectations for people. Social constructs and our socialization experiences often influence the way people view others. Everywhere I’ve worked and been, people assign a set of values to you based on perceived characteristics. For example, if you are a woman, African-American, or a male, there may be specific expectations based on those traits. However, I have consistently witnessed the human spirit overcome any obstacle and defy all stereotypes. I have learned that people everywhere want to be loved, to be respected, to be understood, and to be valued. You find success when you tell others what you want, tell others your expectations of them, and help them meet those expectations. Whenever you do that, people tend to rise to the occasion.

3. What are your views on charter schools and the school choice movement?

I don’t have a position for or against them. My position is that there should be strong and effective schools for ALL children. If it is a traditional school, great, if it’s a magnet school, great, if it’s a choice program, great. I believe it is critical that parents look for what is important to them and what they want for their children — such as school climate, academic outcomes, programming, extracurriculars, and staff characteristics. Parents should always ask, “Does this school meet my child’s needs? Is my child able to progress at this school?” Those should be the determinants, not whether a school is charter, choice, neighborhood, or specialty.

4. Do you feel as a nation we are doing all we can to create equitable educational opportunities for all students? If not, what can we and should we do better?

My concerns lie with the way we fund schools. We fund schools based on taxes and limited state dollars primarily. So, how much money is available to fund schools depends on the amount of income your community has. That in itself promotes inequality. I think that we should be in the business of funding schools based on what we are serving and the needs of the children. We have federal programs that provide additional dollars, but sometimes those dollars have to be used in a very prescribed way, which may not necessarily match the need. I think dollars we receive should be used in a very strategic way so that we know it will have the greatest impact on a child’s future.
There must be accountability on both sides, but decision makers must understand that schools need different funding mechanisms. We are not that yet.

5. How do you keep your local families engaged in the public schools? Do you feel the public schools are valued by the citizens of Savannah?

I feel we have improved greatly in terms of communicating with families — so much so that sometimes they say we are sending them too much information. We communicate with families face to face, through school and district-based events, by email, by telephone call, and through social media. We send lots of information out, and we often survey parents to get their opinions. I believe the level of communication is really high, especially by your parents’ busy lives. We also do several district events that are designed to inform and engage parents. Our Back to School Expo in August this year was close to 6,000 or 8,000 in attendance. Our Back to School events are like our Student Success EXPO every January, where our attendance has gone up to about 15,000 people. Then in the spring, we host a family engagement venue called Books, Blankets, and Family Fun to celebrate reading and literacy. Last year, we had about 10,000 people attend this event.

We continue to work on our customer service, so that when parents have a concern, that concern is addressed quickly. We are doing much better in that area, but of course we still have work to do.

6. Navigating political and social discourse in this county has become harder than ever. As a leader: how do you manage to get your message out to the people that matter?

I focus on face-to-face meetings and social media and written correspondence to get my message out. I regularly communicate with individuals and groups that support what is in the best interest of children. That is my commitment. I try not to engage in behaviors or conversations that I do not think represent the best interests of the district, our schools, our families, our staff, or myself. They are a distraction. My intention is to make sure that I only communicate about what is good for children overall.

I am always willing to have a discussion about very difficult issues, and I am willing to have a respectful conversation about different viewpoints and consider options from another perspective. Discourse is often difficult because some are not fully informed and have not taken the time to think. I think it is the facts that should speak. Of the discourse that I see is highly questionable or driven by anger, emotion, and I just try not to engage in that. I am committed to being available for all and engaging in productive conversations that are in the best interest of our students, families, staff, and this community.

7. What do you think represents the greatest challenge to your students in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System?

The greatest challenge is SCCPSS’s lack of information people have about the potential of children. Some people believe that children are not as capable as they were in the past. Children have much more creativity and so much more to give, but they are growing up in a very difficult time. Children have been changed; childhood has changed. Children now face things I was not exposed to until I was much older, when my brain and senses were able to manage difficult issues. Today, children are bombarded with lots of unfiltered images, thoughts, and circumstances that their brains simply cannot manage. Their childhood is different, and it influences the way they see the world. I also believe that many young people are greatly influenced by others who believe they aren’t capable of great accomplishments. I know that when children can see both the good and the challenging, they are a distraction. My intention is to make sure that I only communicate about what is good for children overall.

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8. Bonus question: If asked, would you ever consider serving as the U.S. Secretary of Education?

(Laughing out loud)

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