

## Interview With John Allison, Part I

**Keith:** When you began in early July, considering the size of this district, did you have any anticipation on how long it would take you to acquire enough knowledge to be able to make informed decisions about Wichita schools?

**Allison:** Yes and no. I think that you're constantly learning. You know, there isn't a day goes by that I don't learn something new and I don't anticipate that changing. You know, as you learn you get to shift your focus a little bit. The size of the district, I knew it would take longer. Take longer to meet folks and to understand all the intricate pieces.

**Keith:** You make different decisions than your predecessors, you're a different person. Was there a little bit of a struggle with how long before you could impact decisions that were getting made in your name?

**Allison:** You know, I think it all depends on what it is. There are some that I still feel like I need to come up to speed and really learn about. I'm not a rash person, I like to see data and work through it and meet and talk with people before I make a decision. Get the input from the various stakeholders and sides. So, probably more methodical than some.

**Keith:** Some of us have been around this district long enough to remember and to compare the past superintendents like Stuart Berger, Larry Vaughn, Winston Brooks. What would you hope would be the teachers' perception of you in say, five years?

**Allison:** That I listened. That I was focused on student achievement and instruction and able to clear the weeds and continue to stay involved in those areas of the district operation and not just the business and the political and the community pieces that are also a large portion of the job.

**Keith:** Switching gears a little bit. We hear complaints from teachers that, in their perception, there seems to be some accountability for building administration around test scores, but little accountability that they can see for how people are treated. What's your philosophy about managing adults?

**Allison:** I think it all comes from a platform of mutual respect. That when you respect someone else, they in turn reciprocate in much the same way. And I think that works on both aspects of it. The way in which a teacher interacts with an administrator or someone else is, it all needs to be on professional courtesy.

**Keith:** Are school districts across the country, in Wichita specifically, becoming too focused on the bottom line? It's all about the test score, their sanctions. Does that contribute to the problem of how you treat people?

**Allison:** I think what happens more than anything else, is the stress factor. Because yes, unfortunately that's what we're being judged on. There are sanctions in place, there are, you know the lists of high performing, low performing all those types of things and there's tremendous pressure. On top of that you throw the pressure for bullying, for childhood obesity, diabetes and nothing ever comes off the plate. And I think that the stress level that comes from all those pieces. Then you have the parents and you have students and community and all those types of things. That all just builds. And I think that there's that interaction under that stress that gets to folks at some point in time. There's certain times a year you see that up and down and ...

**Keith:** There's a lot of it this year.

**Allison:** Yes, and then you throw in financial questions and job security and all those aspects. I don't think there's any way, as much as you try to avoid it, sometimes folks just are not working with each other.

**Keith:** How do you learn what's really going on in our classrooms? If the superintendent walks into a classroom and stays for 3 or 4 minutes, I don't think you're going to sit there and tell me you've now gotten a pretty good handle on what's going on. Your presence is quite a disruption. So how do you learn what's going on in our classrooms?

**Allison:** That's the hardest part, for that exact reason. My goal was to spend time in classrooms in each building as the year's gone along and that hasn't happened. I get to do hit and miss. One of the things I enjoy a great deal is subbing and typically I like to do that once a quarter.

**Keith:** Have you done it at all?

**Allison:** I haven't done it at all this year. And I've even set it up twice to where I planned to go and there's been the crisis of the moment or ... And part of that is being new and the time demands particularly from the community. Everybody wants to meet the new superintendent, they want him to attend their luncheon they want him to do those types of things. So I'm hoping next year there'll be fewer invitations which gives me some latitude. But I think you have to look at it in different ways. I get to talk to teachers at various events. I'm looking at data. I'm very much interested in looking at the data, and looking at the trends and often times I can tell you a little or at least it's as, hey, here are some questions I need to ask, wow this has been great, what's going on here that's making that, or well this isn't so good so what are we doing to impact that.

**Keith:** I went to a workshop a couple times with a gentleman that's into systemic changes and he used a phrase a couple times in regards to schools. He said 'the problem is - the data is true, but the data is not the truth.'

**Allison:** It's a piece and I think of it as, you know when we're working with kids we're kind of building stained glass windows and they're going to be different shapes and different colors and how do you create that beautiful window with all the various pieces and the data is part of it. I think that's probably a part that we haven't done a good job though in education is saying okay, we've got this, what does it tell us, and accepting also what does it not tell us, and then how do we use this to make good decisions. We tend to leap from thing to thing and often times it's.. well, 'I just know this.' And is that really accurate, what's the validity there? I'm very much focused on the systemic ...the changes we have to make have to be systemic. If we're truly going to have traction and lift for all of our students we've got to look at our systems and how they operate together and in many cases how they don't operate together and try to get all those cogs aligned with limited resources and time. Again all those things continually being thrown on the plate, how do we sort through those and leverage everything we've got.

**Keith:** Speaking of data, we hear teachers talking a lot about there's too much teaching to the test. And it's not just Wichita. Every time I go to any kind of a meeting outside of Wichita or outside of the state you hear the same thing. Do you agree, do we teach too much to the test? And if we don't teach to the test how do we score well enough to avoid sanctions?

**Allison:** That's the million dollar question. I guess one of the questions I would say to folks is then what do you want us to teach to? And how do you want us to measure if we've been successful in what we've attempted to do? I think the bigger question is, is the test that we're being held accountable for reflective of what we really

want students to know? I think that's the bigger flaw. We've got to have an objective to teach to. I think the problem is that folks perceive teaching to the test is you just drill and kill for these components. What we know is that doesn't work. There's very small, maybe with a few students, there's a little small lift. But long term sustainability and growth doesn't happen. It's making sure we have a viable curriculum that's aligned to those objectives, that we've got the scope and sequence in place and then if we're teaching the curriculum, the test just comes along with it. I think that's the biggest issue is that a lot of school districts aren't there. We've got some significant work to do on that as well.

**Keith:** No child Left Behind. We've mentioned sanctions and teaching to the test. We're hearing that No Child Left Behind, which is up for reauthorization, might not be changed before the November elections. So it looks like next year, we're probably going to start with the same law we have now, as lovely as that is. So if we are living with the current version of the law next year, there's been a lot of talk in this district about how we do restructuring. Are you in discussions with your management team about change as to how we look at that? I know there aren't a lot of options under the law but there are some.

**Allison:** We really have four options. None of which are proven to be necessarily successful to large scales. Unfortunately, without reauthorization, the reality, if you listen to Secretary Duncan and all talk about it, they want to shift funding streams to competitive grants. But yet they don't have any real intention of yanking the rug out on No Child Left Behind. So I'm afraid the reality we're going to deal with is a system that's going to approach 2014 with the same goals and more sanctions but less flexibility in funding what you need to do.

**Keith:** We hear a lot of it's going to be pretty punitive, at least what's on the drawing board right now.

**Allison:** Yeah. Look at Race to the Top alright? So you get fifteen states that make the first cut and out of fifteen only two of them receive huge amounts of funding and in both of those cases the states basically went down the list and legislatively passed everything that they wanted in the application and then the Gates Foundation came in with all their resources and wrote the applications and backed part of that funding so... Is that really the way we want to approach education as a country? I don't think so, and with very little proof that that really works. Always applying '*the business principal*' to education, it doesn't coincide so I think we're going to be stuck in a catch 22 in that we're still going to have ever increasing accountability standards. We're still going to have sanctions. The resources aren't necessarily going to be available and at the same time we're going to see all these changes, these tweeks occur to the process but without any clear cut direction. At least with No Child Left Behind it was boom, here it is, this is what you're going to have to do and everybody panicked and freaked and it was significant changing. And this one it's... we're going to plod along and I'm not sure we really have a clear direction.

**Keith:** So the stress that all adds to, makes the job of being a superintendent or a building principal or a teacher, that much harder.

**Allison:** Absolutely.

**Keith:** And so that kind of leads me back to ... we were talking earlier about treatment of people. In the most recent addition of The United Voice, UTW President Larry Landwehr wrote a speak out column about two issues in regards to the treatment of people. One was administrative transfers and the other was non-renewals. He did a pretty good job of capturing some of the frustration that we've heard. Did you have a chance to read those and did you have any reaction to that?

**Allison:** I got a chance to read it and I think it's reflective of the stress everybody feels. Going much beyond

that, a little bit of that is kind of when did you stop beating your wife? A gross generalization that's there and I think inevitably we're a people business. We serve people, we are people and that interaction is never going to be perfect but that's where we have to work together to try to... when we've got bumps, how do we work through those – how do we get over that.

**Keith:** So you want to see .. I don't want to put words in your mouth ... but it sounds like you want to see perhaps a little better blending of accountability with treating people fairly?

**Allison:** Yeah. I think that's across all avenues of our district. For us to tackle the tough things we've got ahead of us that means, be it custodial, be it certified, be it administrative, part of what we have to do is, I think, as a group understand a little better, the big picture and I think that's one of the problems with education and that we tend to be very ... we can get a little narrow focused some times. That our world is just this area and not understanding how all these other pieces come in to play. That's where I think that's systemic working better as a system through communication avenues, being able to logically lay out and say, here's our plan folks. In the end of two years or end of three years or end of this year this is where we want to be with these core principals and keeping that continually in front of folks will help make us a better organization.

**Keith:** You mentioned nothing ever comes off the plate. We had an outside expert, big dollar expert, show up and do some district wide inservice activities and talked about weeding your garden, you know taking stuff off the plate. Is that realistic? Can you really do that?

**Allison:** Absolutely. But it doesn't come without pain. It's one of the positive results of tough finances is that when you no longer can do what you've been doing, you no longer have the people and the support mechanisms in place, you have to say what's the most important and, guess what, the rest of these are going to fall away. The problem with weeding your own garden is, some people get very attached to their weeds. I think back to teaching the old love lesson. I taught with a guy that, by God, he had this incredible silver war unit that he would do. Problem was, it wasn't in his curriculum. It had been shifted years before but he couldn't let it go. And those are tough to pull away from, but it's something we have to do, that periodically review in retooling, and weeding or we'll drown. We won't do anything well.