

Interview With John Allison, Part II

Part II

Keith: I think we all know how critical a good principal is to an education. They have such an impact on the whole building and we're going through, as you know, the overhauling of our evaluation system. In our discussions with our national organizations, they talk a lot about *how* an evaluation system is implemented is one of the most critical components. I think being a building principal is probably one of the toughest, if not the toughest, job in education these days. The new evaluation system demands actual observation, the forms and evaluation ... they aren't doing that right now. Is it reasonable for a building principal to do what they do now and add that on to their plate? We don't need to talk specifics on the new evaluation system but, in general.

Allison: I think that's that committee that's working with it and then we've got to know, because of the timing of the contract and all, we got started later on the pilot than we anticipated. We're going to have to look at the implementation very carefully because it does have a lot to do with its eventual success. I guess I can answer a question with a question - "how can we not find the time to do the observations and have the reflective conversations if we're going to continue to advance professionally and for our students?" It goes back to, how do we weed some, I mean what can we do that changes what a principal has to spend their time on. That's the piece where that systemic outlook, your saying okay where are we spending our time, how would we like to spend our time, where don't they meet and why and let's address this. Because that's going to be crucial.

Keith: What kind of expectations do you have for building principals?

Allison: Perfection. I mean, I think you're right they, not to say that anybody doesn't have a hard job, be a classroom teacher, whomever, but a building principal has an almost impossible task. To be an instructional leader, to be counselor, to be budget manager, facility manager, community liaison, all those areas that pull. Much like I think in some ways with teachers, we haven't given, we as an education system overall have not necessarily given the right tools. You think about reading, what we now know about reading now compared to 10 years ago or 20 years ago is huge. I mean it's the difference between the Model T and the space shuttle. But, how much have we really added the extra tools to be able to utilize that knowledge to the best degree. Similar with the demands of a principalship, you're taking somebody that's coming out of a classroom and you suddenly throw all this at them and expect them to do it almost flawlessly, is how people perceive it. And I'm not sure we've helped with the right tools. I know the preparation programs for both teacher and administrator leave a lot to be desired.

Keith: Teaching kids is very different from managing adults.

Allison: Very different from managing adults, working with the community, what may have worked for you in the classroom, you discover boy, isn't working for me as a principal. And we all have strengths and weaknesses. I think that that happens in the classroom, it happens as administrator. You know, if my strength is budgeting, where am I going to spend time because I feel more comfortable with it, and if I'm in the classroom and my strength is ... I really enjoyed American Government more than I did economics, where is most of my time going to be in then, in enriching those types of lessons, and how do you balance all that?

Keith: What are your expectations for downtown administrators or management, if you will?

Allison: My expectations are going to be similar if it's a custodian, a teacher, or an administrator or downtown

management, that we have a job to do and that's supporting our students, student achievement and all those pieces that come together. I see our role as, at a central level, as we need to support the works of what goes on at campuses. Without that, there's no reason to have us, and I think that's where we have to be careful, and as we look at those systems pieces, that are we doing something from our end of the system cog that isn't creating problems with the building pieces or the service center. How do all those fit? We're here to support and serve. And also we've got the burden of making some of those institutional decisions.

Keith: Narrowing of the curriculum is something that has occurred in a lot of districts because of No Child Left Behind, and test scores and all of that, and that's a frustrating thing for an awful lot of teachers. They may not agree with the way it's been narrowed. They may feel that we're missing things that ought to be taught. They may think that their hands are being tied in ways that makes them less effective. What about that perception? Is there communication or education of teachers that needs to occur so they understand why it's happening, or has there been an over-reaction from districts and they've narrowed too much?

Allison: That's a shotgun question... yes to all of the above. I think some districts went way too far in that it became almost prescriptive. Here's day one, this is what I say in the first 10 minutes, and this is what I

Keith: What's your reaction to Wichita at this point on that subject?

Allison: We're not there. And I know some folks feel like we are; in some cases we're still way too broad. I think the idea of narrow does not mean... is not a bad connotation. Often times narrowing of the curriculum is associated with narrowing of the teaching methodology and they're not the same thing. Being prescriptive – this is what you're going to do this is exactly how you're going to do it. Presenting to folks and saying, okay, we're narrowing the objectives because what we want to do and if you look at the core standards, that's what they're doing is they're saying we're not going to do this we're going to do this but deeper. That's going to require a different approach. I'll use math, I like to pick on math teachers you know, my curriculum is the textbook therefore I have to get from chapter one to chapter twenty-three. Well, okay, but what did the kids get in between? They get to chapter twenty-three and they didn't get chapters ten through fifteen. What good did it do to get you to chapter twenty-three? That we're identifying the specific curriculum parameters often times is seen as narrowing it when what you're really doing is, I think, doing some weeding. Kids are held accountable.

Keith: So, strategies, methodologies, if a teacher perceives that the way something is being presented is restrictive, that seems different than what you've just described. You were just talking about curricular issues. So, sorry John, you don't have time to do your Civil War lesson but that doesn't mean he has to do Kagan strategies or he has to do this format for a reading lesson, does it?

Allison: Well, in some cases it may have to be more narrow than others and I think reading is a good example. Not again going to, you have to do this in the first 5 minutes and this in the next 10 minutes and this is what you say. Literacy acquisition and that's where the research we know is very sequential. You get these programs and folks will say, well it didn't work. The question is what was the fidelity of the implementation on that? If you skipped step 3 and 4 but step 3 and 4 have to be there to get to step 5. No, it's never going to work.

Keith: Do you believe in one size fits all like Reading First or Success For All?

Allison: No. I think, what our approach has to be is saying okay, we've identified the curriculum. Curriculum is non-negotiable in my book. Here's what you should be teaching at first grade, now what we then say is, here are some good research based strategies that help. Part of the piece is, we don't have good diagnostic type data for

a teacher to be able to say, wow, number lines ... they're not getting number lines, I need to go back and reteach this, I thought I did a good job, now how can I do this differently? That's the type of tool kit we have to continue to develop. And that's a whole lot easier said than done.

Keith: And that raises the question of professional development, in-service activities. That's a pretty easy target for a lot of teachers. In-services, I don't think we're alone as far as districts go; we get a lot of feedback, a lot of it negative, about in-service days. They don't mind the in-service days if they're productive but a lot of times they don't feel they're productive. And the professional development in buildings is not consistent in terms of whether the teachers think it's productive. Some really like it, and they're saying, wow that really worked for me. Others are going man, that's a waste of time - let me plan. So how do you approach that as a system when you've got 92 buildings?

Allison: I think there are a couple of different ways. I always found it interesting, and it doesn't matter what district you're in when you look at staff development surveys even districts where all the staff development was planned by the teachers, the data is about the same. I mean there are just some folks that feel 'leave me alone, I want to shut my door and no one should ever be allowed in' but we're not independent contractors. We've got to look, if we're going to truly implement and the concept of the MTSS piece, when we look at behavioral, we look at academics. We've got some significant work that we're going to have to do. I think, again being focused, being clear on - these are the objectives; this is what it's going to take to get us there. And the one thing we don't typically do is differentiate our staff development. My wife is PE and she has sat for years and years and years in PD and she finds them to be a good learning experience for her most of the time, cause then she tries to incorporate it. But, for her to sit through Dibels training - was that the best use of her time? Maybe, maybe not. We don't differentiate. So, if you've got a teacher that has a lot of expertise, are there various levels that we could work toward? My ultimate dream, and I think it's a dream - but that doesn't mean you can't get there - would be to say, when we do the Gallop Insight, they talk about a high five teacher. Their research of thousands and thousands or hundreds of thousands show that it's somewhat of a predictor and they call it the high five that stellar teachers have, based on how they respond to their questions. I mean, that's the theory behind it. Why can't we as educators say, this is the high five and this is the skill set we want a teacher to have by year five. So, we need to assess where they are and then we need to provide the opportunity to grow in those areas where they're not proficient.

Keith: How do you do that when you have to slash the budget?

Allison: That's the tough part, that's what I'm saying, it's part of a dream. Particularly we could do that with our probationary teachers as they come in. We're going to have to really hit our literacy piece and change a little bit of that focus. So, how do you do that with a huge system? Well, maybe we have to start, maybe it's K-3 and then we phase in 4-5 and then its 6-8 and you work through those things. Part of that is just that systemic plan and being able to organize it.

Keith: What other long-term improvements and changes to this district would you like to make?

Allison: One, we have to continue to look at that curricular piece and our delivery models. There is some consistency that we need to make sure is infused in the system and to a certain extent that's stepping back somewhat from the site based piece. There are certain site based decisions that should be there. Curriculum in my mind is not one of those, because the other factor we deal with, not only just kids coming from homes of poverty, is serial mobility. So when a kid leaves Seltzer and goes to L'Ouverture, there shouldn't be a huge inconsistency in the curricular objectives. Part of that goes back to your finance question, we're going to provide the support, we're going to provide quality professional development, and we're going to provide the resources. You can't do that

with a thousand different initiatives. One of the first things I asked the principals to do is I said give me a list and I did it by level. I said, of all the different initiatives you have going in your building, be it behavior, curricular, hand writing without tears. Elementary came back in a table format, front and back, 29 pages. In some cases, it was specific grade levels and it happens a lot of different ways. There's that question of, we didn't do well, so what are we going to do now? And instead of, let's figure out why, so what do we need to work on, its and there's got to be an answer out there. I went to a conference in Topeka and they talked about, this is what we need to do, so okay, let's do that and that can be principal initiated or often times its teacher initiated so you might even have in second grade ...

Keith: Or even in-services initiated

Allison: Yeah ...so you've got second grade and I've looked at some of the reading approaches and I'm going, that's interesting. Cause here's one second grade using phonics based approach, here's one second grade using more of a whole language approach. They're in the same building, so what the heck do we think is going to happen when these kids get to third grade and then you looked at third grade and third grade was doing something completely different so that ability to support and that continuity is so tough.

Keith: I could hear some teachers reading your answer and saying: So, he wants us all to teach the same thing, the same way, at the same time. So all the algebra teachers on Wednesday, May 5th are going to be teaching this lesson ...

Allison: Nope. Because they have to be teaching at the students that are sitting in their classroom. And that may mean, unit 1 in algebra 1, I taught today on Tuesday and guess what? I'm still teaching it on Thursday because they haven't gotten it and this group over here may be four chapters ahead of us. That's where the defining what it is, the objectives that a student needs, those outcomes they should have at the end of the course. I think that's where the pacing guides, at least saying theoretically to give you help to pace that out - but we have to adapt to our students and there's going to be some of those cases where, wow, I can do a whole lot more enrichment and in others, I got a whole lot more remediation to do, That's where that data piece comes in to say wow, I've got three kids, I've already taught it four different ways, they're not getting it and I need some extra support to assist these kids. And we just don't have that system in place.

Keith: Last question: Do you think, in the political climate we're in right now and with the stance the chamber of commerce has taken, do you think that Wichita public schools as an entire entity, teachers, UTW, SEIU, administrators, parents, students - are there things we all ought to be doing to educate and work with the community that we aren't doing now? Are there things we should do to try to impact members at the Chamber to say look we have a huge impact on the community we don't feel your support right now. How do you address that as a superintendent? We're one of the biggest businesses in Wichita right?

Allison: Yeah, we are. We're one of the biggest employers. There's a part of it that I'm not sure we can combat - When you come from a philosophy that any tax is bad and nobody likes to pay taxes. I'm very fiscally conservative but to say that, and I've had folks tell me this, now we're the largest employer in town so don't you think when we begin to lay folks off that's going to have an impact.... Oh no, you're a drain, you provide absolutely nothing, no benefit for this community, you are a suck on our resources. Trying to convince somebody with that philosophical stance... we're not going to do it. But I think there are more people that we need to talk about our successes with, we need to invite community members into our buildings to see... I was coming back from Jackson, I think there were four elementaries over there for a science and engineering day and they had Wichita State in. The group I got to go talk to, a Doctor Robin Penancy, he's the computer guy at Wichita State. He's doing

incredible things with groups of fifth graders. Teaching them about sound waves and all these types of things. It's those types of folks and he is a strong advocate for our schools. Not only does he have kids in our school system, and he doesn't have to, but early on when they got here he got into our schools and saw what was going on. We've got to be more vocal about the great things that are going on, what role we play. I haven't quite figured out how folks can assume that, if we don't succeed, how Wichita is going to succeed. That's the bottom line - as goes Wichita Public Schools will go the community.

Keith: I'm not convinced though that enough people want us to succeed.

Allison: No, I think that there are some of them with that philosophy ... that we're just a big drain on the community. We're just dealing with a completely different philosophy. We've got to talk more about what's going on, people need to have those conversations with friends and neighbors. I had to have one this last weekend that I thought I would never have - that was with my own parents, and my mom's a former school teacher. I guess you're never former, but... They had been to a church deal, they live in Kansas City, they'd been to a church deal and Kevin Yoder spoke to the church group in a session. He laid out how education has more money than they need and we're not being effective. He does his whole diatribe and his budget would add surplus to the state. He goes through this and my parents are questioning, why are you suing the state? Don't you have enough? I'm thinking, these are my own parents and I have to defend this and that's because we've got folks like that out there. That's why that advocacy, be it from SEIU, UTW and everybody involved and our parents is so important to make sure folks continually hear that.

Keith: Thank you.