

“Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the wrong. Sometime in life you will have been all of these.”

- Lloyd Shearer

As we exit September and move into October, I am proud to say that we opened well. September was a month of new experiences for many in our schools. New teachers met their colleagues and students for the first time, students transitioned to new grades, new buildings, and new teachers, and new families moved to the city of Malden. In the midst of all this ‘newness,’ our schools created a calm sense of consistency for all those who entered them. For that, I thank you all!

When you are a superintendent, things become somewhat predictable at the start of a school. You anticipate calls from parents who are not happy with the placement of a child and transportation issues. You prepare yourself for the last minute hiring that happens, vacancies that still need to be filled, and the general chaos of opening a school district. It becomes routine to you and you plan accordingly. This year was a little different because before the month ended I was confronted with a situation that was ‘new’ to me.

On September 28th I entered my office at 6:45 a.m. to find water pouring out of the ceiling. Shortly after, I received a call that the special education offices on the second floor were flooded out. By 6:55 a.m. I knew we were in trouble at City Hall as water was flowing, ceiling tiles were falling, and light units were filling with water. Great way to start a work week.

A brief summary of the events of that morning starts with a valve attached to a boiler being worked on located on the roof opened over the weekend, flooding the building on one side. As work crews entered the building they closed one valve only to find another valve let go somewhere else in the building. Long story short, special education and central offices were a total loss. We had to move. I was “office-less.”

Why do I share this story? Well, I never thought I would be office-less, but I found myself and many others without a place to go. Needing a central office to work from so that we could continue to serve the children and parents of Malden, I needed to make quick decisions that resulted in a domino effect where numerous staff members were displaced on very short notice. I watched adults struggle with having to make quick decisions, I saw the confusion in people as they lost the comfort of familiar surroundings and had to pack only the most essential items... I witnessed the resistance to accepting their current situation, and a reluctance to accept that things needed to change. In the middle of figuring out how to move three major school offices in less than 72 hours, Kelly and I questioned how do families who find themselves homeless deal with that reality? Here we had adults who had home stability, yet found it incredibly difficult to accept unpleasant but necessary change. So what happens to our district’s children when they have their lives turned upside down by homelessness?

At this time we have 116 homeless Malden children in our classrooms which is an increase from 72 last year. The families of these children are homeless for many reasons: financial reasons, a lack of affordable housing, and eviction notices, just to highlight a few. These children may have once had a bedroom, a living room, a kitchen, and a back yard, but much like a flood at city hall, it all changed for them in a blink of an eye. I can only imagine the range of emotions a child must feel being homeless - the anxiety, the fear, and reality of being displaced. They must struggle having to grab what they can, take only what they need, and leave many things behind. I saw these same emotions in many of the people I worked with as we were dealing with this flood situation.

I found myself trying to calm the anxiety of professionals who may not be able to have everything they need at their fingertips. Early on in the process my focus turned from the technical issues of moving to helping people to understand the urgency of situation and the need to ‘act fast’ and ‘make do’ for now while we build a plan the future. I did my best to be strategic, understanding, and emotionally detached, but to be honest, there were moments in which I lost my ability to be calm and said, “Just do it.” To anyone I may have offended, I apologize.

I can only imagine the frustrations a homeless parent must be dealing with as they wake up every day to the insecurity of situation, not knowing if support will be there, and the constant questioning from a child, “When are we going home?” The week of September 29th was a true test for me, and in all honesty, I struggled. It wore me down, it frustrated me, it angered me, but it allowed me to appreciate on a small level what homeless parents must feel.

Well, we survived the flood and moved three offices in 72 hours. We opened special education and business offices at the high school (which is why you never skipped a beat on your paychecks for the week) and central office is now on the second floor at City Hall where the business office used to be. It was an amazing feat which required the coordinated effort of many. I am fortunate to have a strong support staff around me. People I could depend on in a crisis situation. Without them this would have never happened.

This experience has left me with many questions as I reflect on it. How many of our homeless families have the support systems to carry them through their crisis? How many homeless children have the social/emotional support they need while being homeless? Who is meeting the social/emotional and physical well-being of those families? I hope on some level we are!!

Did I ever expect to be ‘office-less’ as a superintendent? No, but like the quote states, “Sometime in life you will have been all of these.” Add office-less to the list. I appreciate the efforts of all involved in this move. It wasn’t easy, and it’s not perfect, but at least it’s just our offices.

Dave