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Written Responses—Lake Wales Charter School System

1. How do you address issues of school and district culture?

Building a team where everyone—students, teachers, parents, and community members—is focused on a shared vision isn't easy and doesn't happen overnight. The foundation for a collaborative and innovative culture is trust, and building trust among all stakeholders starts with servant leadership.

Teachers and students need their leaders to show up consistently and sometimes in surprising ways. They see me in schools, in the hallways, in the classrooms, and even at their homes—they know my face and my name. My team knows that I won't ask them to do anything I am not willing to do myself.

For example, after Hurricane Katrina, we used one of our high schools as a Red Cross shelter. The school had lost power, and without running water, the bathrooms were in a horrible state. I could not ask our maintenance team to deal with that clean up alone. I asked our administrators to suit up, and we rotated with our maintenance team until we had scoured and disinfected each restroom. I wanted our maintenance department to know that we supported and valued them.

During the pandemic, I promised our Class of 2020 and their parents that we would have a traditional graduation ceremony even though we'd had a virtual ceremony in May. We were finally able to have that ceremony on Father's Day weekend. The demands of COVID had left our maintenance department overwhelmed and spread thin, so I went to the stadium on Father's Day and broke down the set, stacking every chair so my maintenance team would only have to return the chairs to storage. I kept my promise to senior students and parents and lightened our maintenance team's workload.

I value the power of parental involvement in schools and believe that connecting with parents improves student outcomes. However, I know that parent contacts can be time-consuming for teachers. So I gladly make home visits for the Third Grade Reading Gate, making over 2,200 of these visits in recent years. I bring a book to each third grader's home and ask parents how we can help their children. I want parents, principals, and teachers to know we are in it together and many hands make light work.

Finally, I address school and district culture by cheerleading for students and teachers. As the face of the district, it is vital that the superintendent establish good relationships with the media, cultivate a culture of success by publicly celebrating student and teacher accomplishments, and courageously advocating for them when needed.

At a recent football game, the wind blew over several props during the band's half-time performance. I and another teacher rushed to the field and hid behind those props, holding

them down so that the band could continue its show. Perhaps none of these small efforts alone affect school and district culture, but when you consistently show up, willing to do whatever it takes, fill in the gaps, and serve the people of your district—you cultivate a culture of trust and collaboration.

2. How do you hold yourself and others in the district accountable?

Holding myself and others in the district accountable is closely connected to district culture.

First, you have to have systems in place for accountability. These systems do not have to be complex, but they DO need to be clear.

As a principal, I created a template system that outlines expectations for each stakeholder in a given situation. For example, what do class changes look like? What should students be doing during class changes? Where should teachers be? What about administrators and counselors? This template system is not complex—it's a simple chart created in word processing software. But it clearly outlines expectations, and it is flexible to meet unique, individual building-level needs and district-level needs.

However, all the systems and templates in the world can't affect accountability without proper training. Asking people to do things they are not trained to do is a sure way to negatively affect accountability (and culture) because people feel they are being set up for failure when they are not properly trained.

There is no greater example of the importance of clear expectations AND training, than the dilemma we faced in March 2020. Our teachers suddenly had to shift from in-person to virtual teaching, and we knew that lack of training on these platforms would be a barrier to success for both students and teachers. So we created a free Virtual Tech Camp for Teachers to help them navigate the unique challenges of providing quality online learning and have trained over 5,200 educators from 161 Mississippi counties and 19 states.

Transparency is another important aspect of accountability. First, the superintendent should be visibly engaged in and a part of the community. Additionally, inviting the community IN to be a part of the work of education encourages transparency and accountability. This includes ensuring meetings are accessible so that parents and teachers can have their voices heard. Also, I cannot overstate the value of community and business partnerships, which are vital to creating career pathways for our students and developing a skilled workforce. Finally, the community should be a part of creating the district's strategic plan. If you want accountability,

include people and make them a part of the plan so that the work of the district truly is a shared community vision.

Perhaps the most important method of personal accountability is what I call the daily mirror test. Everyday I look in the mirror and ask myself, “Did we get better today as a result of my efforts? Or did we take a step backwards?” I have that honest internal dialogue and build a plan to improve the next day. When a method is not working, then we have to be honest enough examine why and be willing to change course.