

Okaloosa TIGER Committee Candidate Survey 2020

Candidate Name -

Ray Sansom

Please type responses in the text boxes for each question. Limit responses to the text boxes. Save your survey to your computer, then attach and email to Carol Barlow cvb116@gmail.com.

1. In any capacity (teaching, administration, district level leadership) what sort of unique and inspired, "out of the box" idea did you implement that saw results?

I am going to answer this question by presenting a unique problem and my solution.

The Okaloosa Academy works hand in hand with the school district. Students are sent to us from public schools because of discipline, academic failure or both. Our goal is to get them back on track.

When I took over as Vice President of School Administration, there was no real path for our students to go back into the public schools. It seemed to be a "life sentence". Their situation was handled on a case by case basis with each different public school with no criteria in place. I saw this as unfair and I knew that we were missing an opportunity to provide some motivation and accountability for our students and parents.

I created a contract with clear criteria that would give each student sent to the Academy an avenue to earn their way back to their public school. The criteria covered specifics about attendance, behavior, grades and academic credit progress. Now, when each student arrives at our school to enroll, the student, parent and administrator have a conference. At the conference, the contract is explained in detail. Once everyone is sure that they understand the criteria, the parent, the student and the administrator all sign it. The agreement with the school district is that if the Academy Principal does not sign her approval, the student will not be accepted back into her public school.

The contract is used throughout the student's educational journey with us for both accountability and motivation. This simple solution brought a sense of hope, fairness and consistency to the process.

2. What do you consider to be your weaknesses and strengths as a potential superintendent?

My greatest strength is the experience that I bring to the table. The rich variety of leadership roles that I have been fortunate to hold have, over time, developed me as a leader. I am able to cast a vision, build a qualified team, innovatively solve problems, communicate directly, back up staff, make tough decisions and step up and lead through messy, difficult times.

My experience as an Okaloosa County Commissioner will serve the school district well because I understand sitting on the “voting side” of the school board meetings. It also gives me insight into the importance of transparency between the board members and the Superintendent. I was the youngest Chairman in the history of the county for 4 of my eight years on the board. This gave me many opportunities to lead through good times as well as turbulent times, all while communicating directly to the public without using a spokesperson. I believe that the voters deserve to hear directly from the person that they placed in office.

As a member of the Florida House of Representatives, I filed legislation to change the unfair education funding formula which placed Okaloosa schools at the bottom of the state in per student funding. I served on several education committees and as the House Budget Chair for the entire state, overseeing a 73 billion dollar budget. As the Budget Chair, I developed one of the best education budgets to date. I was also honored to be elected by my peers to be the 84th Speaker of the House. As Speaker, I put together a team of legislators and staff, and was responsible for several thousand employees. Because of my legislative experience, I know how to fight for Okaloosa Schools in the Florida Legislature.

While in the legislature, I was also serving as the Director of Community Affairs and the Executive Director of the Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation. Under my leadership for six years, 2,900 mentors were recruited and trained, 4,000 students across every school benefited from 60,000 hours of mentoring and service and more than a million dollars were raised for scholarships for disadvantaged and deserving students.

For the last 10 years, I have worked with dropout prevention schools, spanning three school districts. Starting as a Dean of Discipline, then a Principal and finally, a promotion to Vice President of School Administration, I have worked with principals to create a culture which will help students find the path to graduation. I am passionate about ALL students having a chance for a future that offers choices.

3. What is the one thing you learned in your career that you think will help you become the type of superintendent our district needs?

The one thing that I have learned in my career that has made me the type of superintendent that our district needs is that **an organization cannot possibly be healthy if the leader avoids the toughest, most difficult issues.** The culmination of my experiences have taught me that a leader must lead in the good, the bad and the ugly times, which requires fearlessness balanced with humility. This means that the Superintendent must be willing to tackle the messy, hard to navigate issues so that schools are free to thrive.

4. The face of education is constantly changing. What is one recent trend that you think will have a major influence on school districts in the years to come?

While there are several trends such as school safety, technology and a changing culture that all deserve attention, the one that I believe must be dealt with immediately is the unsupported teacher. Teachers are shouldering more responsibilities and feeling less supported every year. To the hardworking teacher, the word **monitoring** now sounds like “prove yourself again” or “gotcha” and the word **innovative** sounds like “another new way” or “one more thing”. The progression is that teachers are handling more discipline, mental health, family issues and school safety all while trying to dance through high stakes, high pressured state testing. If this trend continues, we will experience a massive teacher shortage.

5. What can you do to foster a culture of support for educators and all those who work with children on a daily basis?

As I stated in my previous answer, our next leader must initiate a complete culture change when it comes to supporting teachers and others working with students.

Because I work with teachers who are tasked with teaching students who have extreme academic deficiencies along with learning gaps, and because I am married to a teacher of a state tested subject (math), I am well aware of the overwhelming and oppressive culture in which they are working.

1st As the leader, I will create a culture in which the mindset of every employee in the district is that their job, either directly or indirectly, supports teachers, thereby, supports the education of our students. The focus would be on the interaction/relationship between the teachers and the students and then radiate out from there.

2nd The vast majority of teachers chose a career in education because they wanted to inspire and pour into young people. They arrive on the job educated and certified, with a plethora of talents, ideas and a strong work ethic. I aim to create a culture that puts a stop to micromanaging the learning process/methods. I would eliminate the constant barrage of the latest trends, sold at seminars which are attended by non-instructional, district-level personnel. I would encourage the exchange of new ideas to be naturally occurring and teacher driven.

I will guide the district and school personnel to set our seasoned teachers free to use their knowledge and talents to create their own unique learning environment in order to teach the state standards. This will promote the inter-collegial sharing of ideas and methods to less experienced teachers. Teachers will tell us that no two groups of students are the same. Our teachers deserve the respect and freedom to tailor their methods to each group. Teachers deserve our confidence in their ability to tweak and refresh as they see fit.

3rd Discipline must be addressed in the Okaloosa County School District. Too many instructional minutes are being lost to classroom disruptions. Yes, solid classroom management is expected, however, the lingering issues that interrupt the flow of learning are acting as a chain on our teachers. I am aware that teachers spend many hours planning purposeful, engaging lessons, only to be derailed, many times by the same small group.

I will give teachers relief. They cannot simultaneously teach the required state standards, communicate with all of the stakeholders, do the essential recordkeeping, manage their classrooms AND take care of most of the discipline.

Also, I will ensure that teachers feel supported with safety procedures.

4th I will invest in smaller classes for struggling students and/or assistance in those classes. In my opinion, we simply cannot continue to tell teachers that we cannot afford essential educational programs and personnel. These are vital elements that will directly improve the learning process.

As I mentioned before, I will begin at the sacred interaction between students and teachers and work out from there. I will shift the priorities so that every resource points in this direction.

6. How will you develop a positive working relationship with OCEA and OESP?

First, I want to say thank you for endorsing me while I was in the FL House of Representatives. I enjoyed a solid working relationship with you as a legislator. We built a positive partnership by having a scheduled weekly meeting. I am committed to this same schedule as your superintendent. I will speak directly to you, not through a designated representative.

I feel strongly that trust and confidence can only be built by great communication. I am an upfront person and I will always give clear answers and share what is on my mind. I commit to you to be a good listener and that the issues that are important to you, will be important to me.

In summary, I am sure that we will have the same positive and open dialogue as we did when I was your legislator.

7. What is the primary function of a superintendent today?

According to FS 1001.51, it clearly outlines the duties and responsibilities of a school superintendent. For example, it lays out that a superintendent is responsible for hiring qualified personnel, transporting students, school finances, creating an annual budget, maintaining records and reports, being visible in schools, establishing an administrative organization, curriculum support, and the care of school assets just to name a few.

To put it in practical terms, the Superintendent is the CEO of the school district. He sets the tone, charts the course, must work closely with the school board and is also responsible for hiring and supervising administrators, the CFO and school principals. Also, the safety and security of students, faculty, staff, administrators and visitors/volunteers will be top priority.

The Superintendent must be willing to effectively respond to all constituencies in the district; teachers, students, parents, staff, and the community at large. He must understand how to allocate school funds and human resources to support the learning process that takes place between teachers, students and parents.

In my mind, there are four critical factors that make an effective superintendent:

- 1) clear vision
- 2) effective communicator
- 3) good listener
- 4) unafraid to make tough decisions in the face of criticism

8. What do you believe is the most important concern in our district and what is your plan to address it?

In the 14 months that I have been a candidate for Superintendent, I have interacted with the community and school personnel through meetings, conversations and knocking on doors. The constant theme is that trust has been lost. This was brought on by the realization that our public school district has lacked transparency. This fact was confirmed by a recent survey of Okaloosa school staff. It showed that transparency in the current interim superintendent's district administration ranked lowest of all 19 categories surveyed.

Instead of asking you to trust me to do something to correct this, I will share what I have made a practice in my 30 plus years of public service. As superintendent I will continue to:

Host weekly call-in radio shows

Return phone calls and emails promptly

Meet with parents

Knock on doors (after elected)

Maintain daily communication with principals

Conduct regular visits to schools

Hold teacher input meetings

OCEA and OESP scheduled weekly meetings

Establish a two-way communication loop with schools

Be the district's spokesperson for ALL issues

9. How would you work with legislators to positively impact education issues that affect this school district?

I am excited to use my unique qualifications as a former leader in the State Legislature to benefit our school district. With the recent COVID-19 crisis, there is no doubt that the Florida budget will be greatly affected. This will place a lot of pressure on district budgets and state school funding.

While I was the Budget Chair in 2007-08, Florida faced a similar budget situation with the housing crisis. I was tasked with reducing the state budget by over one billion dollars. Even with these deep cuts, I was able to develop one of the best education budgets to date. This experience gave me an intricate knowledge of the role of education within the budget.

Just as my experience as a county commissioner will help me to positively work with the school board, my experience as a legislator will help me to positively work with legislators. I am confident that I will work well with the Florida Legislature to ensure that Okaloosa County and teachers are not forgotten.

10. How do you plan to lead the district differently from our previous superintendents?

I realize that this could be sensitive and I want to be respectful, but at the same time, truthful. As an educational leader, I find it very hard to believe that the current interim was completely unaware of the whole child abuse investigation. While under oath, the interim clearly admitted that he did supervise the ESE department. Teachers do not get a pass for not knowing what is going on in their classrooms. Principals do not get a pass for not knowing what is going on in their schools. I do not believe that the Assistant Superintendent over ESE should get a pass for not knowing about a horrific event in one of his departments and in one of his schools.

Everyone involved in this horrible situation has been made to pay consequences except for him. In full transparency, if I was over a division (like ESE), and supervised a school that had a 21 interview investigation on child abuse, and I said that I found out about it a year and a half later by reading the newspaper, I would not be running to be the district's top leader..

Throughout my time as the Vice President of School Administration, managing the toughest schools in the county, I have put a system in place whereby the principals that I supervise are unmistakably clear on one thing – to call me and fully inform me of the good, the bad and the ugly. I assure them that we can work together through any situation as long as they are

completely committed to transparency with me. It is my responsibility to create this expectation of open communication. In essence, I will lead through the bad and the ugly, not avoid it.