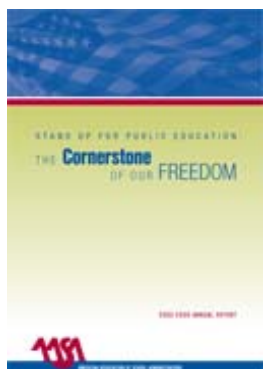



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THE SCHOOL Administrator

January 2004

A Crusader for Early Literacy

By Jay P. Goldman

From the day he landed in the southeastern Washington community of Kennewick as district superintendent, Paul Rosier let it be known through his actions, as well as his words, that he intended to be the school district's instructional leader.



Rosier is a big-picture guy who likes to spend time peering through small windows. In a masterful way of modeling what he believes, he has committed from the beginning of his tenure to visit every classroom in the district for 10-15 minutes every school year. That's upwards of 900 classroom visits, and last year he reached 96 percent of them. What's more, Rosier leaves each teacher a personalized note in his or her mailbox describing an instructional strategy that he observed.

"It reinforces what I think is effective in that teacher's instruction," he says. "I try to point to something I saw that really worked."

This unusual practice, which Rosier says he learned years ago from teacher training guru Madeline Hunter, speaks to the superintendent's collaborative style and his desire to ensure staff members feel valued, says Jan Fraley, president of the teachers' union in Kennewick. The individual note writing, she adds, "blew everyone away. ... People find them very meaningful. Some keep a collection of each one they've received."

Rosier, who has been Kennewick's superintendent for 10 years following shorter-term superintendentcies in Colorado and Arizona, has committed like few others to developing students' literacy skills as the gateway to wider success. Based on what he viewed as the failures of compensatory

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education, he strongly encouraged the school board's adoption eight years ago of a lofty goal: 90 percent of all 3rd graders reading at or above grade level. On last spring's assessment, 86 percent were doing so, and 9 of 13 elementary schools cleared the mark.

Rosier, who wrote a book about his literacy campaign, *The 90 Percent Reading Goal*, acknowledges that few thought the high target would be attainable at first without exempting students in special education—an idea that he rejected. “Belief follows behavior, not vice versa,” he says.

The Utah native's first years as an educator, teaching English as a second language in Mexican Hat, Utah, and directing bilingual education at a Navaho school in Chinle, Ariz., have richly influenced his thinking about literacy as the primary academic target. The key lesson he has carried forth from those experiences, he says, is that “you can have a tremendous effect on children if the effort is focused and if we hold ourselves and our children to high accountability.”

In Kennewick, a district of 14,800 students, the superintendent has raised the percentage of the district budget committed to professional development from 3 percent to 7 percent. He has freed three of the district's most skillful teachers to work full-time with teachers in their first two years in the classroom. He has placed literacy coaches at every middle and high school. He also convinced the teachers' union to loosen its ironclad grip on seniority, allowing the administration to use teacher qualifications as a basis for transfers.

“Paul's a very fair person, very interested in looking at the complete picture whether looking at a particular teacher or an academic issue,” says Fraley.

In addition, Rosier now requires every principal, assistant principal and central-office administrator in curriculum and instruction to spend at least 10 hours per week in classroom observations, teacher training or review of videotapes of classroom instruction. This requirement, he concedes, has been a struggle for some, particularly assistant principals. Yet in a strong union environment such as Kennewick the effect of these individual sacrifices has been to move the conversation over time from adult issues to student learning issues.

“It's almost like a marriage,” says Rosier. “Trust is very difficult to maintain. Sometimes you make mistakes. Trust always seems to depend on your last action.”

The subtleties of Kennewick's shift aren't lost on outsiders. Cheryl Dell, publisher of the *Tri-City Herald* and one of Rosier's enthusiastic boosters, says what impresses her most is the superintendent's leadership in developing systems that integrate education into the fabric of the community.

“I really like the way he keeps you focused on the big goals, even as you go through tough situations that are no different than any other (districts),” she says. “He does a very good job of staying on target.”

Jay Goldman is the editor of *The School Administrator*. E-mail: jgoldman@aasa.org

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Bio Stats: Paul Rosier

Currently:

superintendent, Kennewick, Wash.

Earlier:

superintendent, Mesa County Valley School District, Grand Junction, Colo.

Age:

61

Greatest Influence on Career:

Wayne Holm, an outstanding educator with whom I worked on the Navajo Indian Reservation, showed me that schooling in the most challenging of situations can be successful with dedicated, well-trained people and strong leadership.

Best Professional Day:

The day Kennewick School District was selected as a model school district by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and awarded a \$7 million school re-invention grant.

Books at Bedside:

Working on the Work by Phillip Schlechty and December 6 by Martin Cruz Smith

Biggest Blooper:

Answering an e-mail attachment on a sensitive personnel situation and hitting the send button just as I realized I had forwarded it to the wrong person. Of course the big blooper was sending anything sensitive via e-mail.

A Reason Why I'm an AASA Member:

AASA provides the most responsive and responsible leadership of all the national educational organizations. I am proud to be a member.

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