

SOUNDING BOARD

With Chris Cook,
Crittenden County
school board chair



Your district's proposed nickel tax was voted down by referendum last fall. What lessons did the school board learn through the process and will you try for a nickel again in the future?

We found out that timing is critical. You can do everything possible, if the timing is not right, unfortunately it will not succeed. Our district and our staff did everything possible to educate our community, particularly our taxpayers, for the need for the second nickel, and we did everything we could to advocate for that second nickel but the timing simply was not right in our community. The only thing that I would share for any other district that is considering proposing the second nickel would be if you start seeing that you're not having the support that you would like in the community, then literally have phone banks and contact every registered voter in your district, letting them know about the need for the second nickel, and letting them know when the vote would occur and asking them to go out and vote, because I think that's what our opposition did. They had a huge voter turnout. At this time, we do not anticipate proposing the second nickel again.

Nine years ago, the *Kentucky School Advocate* did a story on Crittenden County's 2020 program. Could you update us on the program and how it relates to the district's new Profile of a Graduate?

Our 2020 Vision was really our guiding light for several years in terms of how we wanted our graduates to leave our school system and be prepared for the next chapter of life, in fact for the rest of their life. It has largely served its purpose and so actually our new Profile of a Graduate has taken the place or transformed into what our 2020 Vision used to be. And that Profile of a Graduate, this really gives us a visual of how we want our graduates to be when they leave Crittenden County Schools. The visual is a profile of the side of a person's head and different parts of the head have different characteristics listed there: Communication, collaboration, problem solving. Those are just a few of those characteristics that we want included in the Profile of a Graduate from Crittenden County Schools. We have pretty well developed the framework for that. We're just now in the process of filling in some last details and fine-tuning it, but it is already at the point it can become the new guiding light for our district.

Getting to know Chris Cook

Years served on school board: 14

Profession: Community banker

Where were you born: Paducah

Favorite subject in school:
Social studies

Hobbies: Travel; time with family and friends; swimming; walking

Special talent: Connecting with people

A resource you would recommend to other board members:
Leaderscast, which is an annual leadership online simulcast held in May. "That is a day of leadership inspiration and it just reminds us as leaders what we're here to do."

Favorite TV show: *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest* and the sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s

Favorite food: Italian

Tell us something unique about your school district.

We are committed to removing every possible barrier from our students being able to succeed and then giving them as many varied opportunities as possible. We're blessed to be one of those districts that has free breakfast and lunch program for all our students. But we go beyond that. We have just added a second chance breakfast. So, for our middle and high school students between first and second period, they've got five minutes there that they can run by a table and pick up something to eat. We send backpacks home with our kids that need them on the weekend with ready-to-eat food so that we know they're not hungry on Saturday and Sunday. We do a summer feeding program but the location travels around our community each day, and we not only do it in June, we do it in July. We have even built beds for our kids to have in their home. We provide school nurses and mental health counselors for every student in the district. So, we just really try to make sure that any of those basic needs of our children are met so they are able to focus on learning and achieving. Some of the opportunities we provide, we were one of the first 25-27 school districts in the state to offer the aerospace program, which is really unique because we actually have probably one of the nicest small airports in the state. So, we've been able to partner with them, we've even been able to get an old plane donated that our kids are going to take apart and put back together as part of the aerospace program. Another commitment that our board has made for a number of years is that for any student or group that qualifies for state or national competition, we will pay up to 75 percent of the expenses of attending and participating in that competition.

What do you think is the biggest issue facing K-12 education right now and why?

That is something I talk about all the time, and that is reminding our state and our nation that public education is one of the core values of our country along with the belief that every student has the right to an education. And that second part

differentiates us from many of the high-achieving countries around the world because their belief is not that every child has a right to a public education, but every child that they consider worthy of a public education has that right. Beyond being a part of the very fabric of our culture, public education is the foundation of economic development and I think that is something that many folks have forgotten. Public education prepares and provides an overwhelming majority of this country's workforce and so as a state and as a country, we need to focus our efforts, our energy and our resources on making public education the best that it can be. Dividing our efforts, our energy and our resources is not going to help us as a country.

What advice would you give to someone starting out as a school board member?

I think one of the most important things as a board member is for us to remember that we are there to provide guidance to the district, but the experts are those individuals, those staff members of our district, that are serving our purpose day in and day out. And so, it's so important to get to know them. Let them get to know you. And so, spending time at special events, before school opens or after it closes, just times that you can have a few minutes for those staff members to see you and get to know you and, more importantly, for you to get to know them.

This question is from our previous interviewee, Floyd County school board Vice-chair Dr. Chandra Varia: What is the best thing you do for the students in your district?

The best thing that I do is actually be the No. 1 cheerleader for our staff. And that is something that our staff regularly says to me. Our staff, those are the individuals that are there working with our kids every day, whether that's a teacher, an administrator, a cafeteria worker, a bus driver, a janitor. Those are the folks that are there, interacting and loving our kids every day. And so, the best thing that I can do as a board member is to be their cheerleader and let them know that they've got someone who believes in them, is an advocate for them. One of the things that I love about the role that I serve is it gives me the opportunity on opening day, with all 200 of our school staff, and closing day, with all 200 of our school staff, to provide them a speech of inspiration and encouragement and affirmation, and that is something I love, love doing. I enjoy preparing for that. I'm collecting stories and quotes throughout the time between each speech.

What question would you like to ask the next school board member we profile?

How do you build community support for public education in your community? ■