

SOUNDING BOARD

With Dr. Chandra Varia,
Floyd County school
board vice chair



What are your feelings on the new transcript requirement?

The stupidest idea I have ever heard. You can put that word for word.

Serving in your local medical practice, what kind of insight has that given you as a school board member?

OK, let me just tell you why I became a board member. I was delivering the baby of a 17-year-old pregnant woman. She came, and I have a very busy practice, so we have a lot of things we give them to read. If there are any questions, we answer them after we check them. We give them about three pages and she finished it in just five minutes. I was so impressed because she's so smart. Then I asked, "You really don't have any questions?" She said, "I cannot read." High school senior cannot read. If I give scholarships to college, and kids don't get reading in high school, how can I change it? So, only I can change if I become a school board member. At that time, I had no idea it was an elected post or anything. So, I told people I know that I would like to be a school board member. There was no vacancy at that time.

That's the reason: "I cannot read." Those words made me become a school board member. I cannot read, from a high school senior. You see, we're spending millions of dollars on scholarships and kids cannot read in high school. What's the deal?

I was in India, and I had a very, very bad car accident. Me and my husband were in the hospital for six weeks. It was that bad.

They sent me an application form for school board at Bombay in the hospital, because someone had resigned. God gave me a second life. So, I wanted to do something I liked. So, I applied. I don't know how long they waited for me to come back and interview. It was the last day they interviewed me, and I became school board member.

Getting to know Dr. Chandra Varia

Years served on school board: 17

Profession: Obstetrics and gynecology (OBGYN)

Where were you born: Jamnagar, India

Favorite subject in school: Surgery (medical school)

What book would you recommend to other board members:

Read as much as they can. "When you read, it just opens your world. When you can see the sky, the stars will tell the story."

Children/Grandchildren: 1 daughter and 2 grandchildren

Hobbies: Surgery, Travel

How did you prepare to be a school board member?

I was a highly educated person. I was illiterate as a school board member. I had no idea what exactly is free and reduced lunch and all that, so I was learning. It was a year and a half, and then I had to run in the election. And I had never known how to do it, but people helped me. I visited almost every home in my district. I learned how people live. No electricity. No running water. It changed my attitude about the school system. The first time, like within my third or fourth week, my husband used to tell me that I never read for my (medical) board exams as closely as I would read the school board agenda. At that time, it was not online. It was 700-800 pages. Our board meeting lasted from 6 o'clock to 12 o'clock at night. It was that bad.

Do you think that charter schools will ever take root in your region?

I don't think so. I was in San Antonio (for NSBA's conference) and I attended a charter meeting with someone who has a charter school. They came and said the kids were so happy because everyone knows each other. Yes, but there are only 250 kids. My county is 6,000. Jefferson county is 100,000 kids. To know every child is impossible. I asked him, "You're a small school. What about your music and art?" (He said) "We don't have it. We don't have money." Charter schools, if not a big one, won't hold their facilities. I don't think they are good artistic facilities. I don't think they can handle special needs kids. The charter school concept is not bad if

you do exactly the right way, word by word, you can take care of every child's needs. But I don't think that is going to happen, at least not for the next 10 years.

What motivates you and your family to be such strong supporters of your community?

When I was young, my father used to tell us to buy in your hometown. He said that if you don't buy in your hometown, you're not going to find good stuff in your hometown. Right now, it's just Amazon and Walmart. Small stores – mom and pop stores – are no more. You go into the store, and people know each other. That's what my father taught us. In my house, I never bought a car unless it's made in Kentucky. Most of my cars have been Toyota Camrys or something like that. Everything in my house is local – if I can buy it.

The second thing my father taught us when we were young was if you make \$100, you cannot spend \$101. You have to save \$1 for a rainy day. And you give 5 percent of your income to people who are not as rich as you. When you work in your community, you are to help them. Me and my husband have a \$1.6 million foundation (the Varia Family Foundation, Inc.) for scholarships that we deal with.

When you were in school, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a lawyer because I read Perry Mason, and I saw all the old dramas. I am so happy that I did not become a lawyer. My father wanted me to be a doctor. But Perry Mason and the courtroom dramas - I wanted to be like that. I became a doctor and I am so happy.

What is one question you would like us to ask the next board member we profile?

What is the best thing you do for your kids? That's the one question I ask every board member. When you're a board member, every child is your own child. ■