

Mary Rosten: Today is Friday, March 24, 2006. Mary Rosten interviewing Superintendent of Gwinn Schools Steven Peffers. If you could please start by telling me the length of time you've spent in the community and in this position.

Steven Peffers: Sure... This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> year as Superintendent of Gwinn Area Schools. I've lived in the Central Upper Peninsula for about 21 years now. 17 years in Munising, a year in Marquette, and now 3 years out here in Gwinn.

MR Okay, great. And can you tell me anything that's shifted in the last three years, if there has been a shift in your school, either in any environment, school closings, anything like that since you've been involved in the school?

SP Since I have been at Gwinn Schools, there have been no major shifts or no major changes that have taken place as far as building closures, building additions, openings ah... large numbers of students coming or going, as far as our total enrollment is concerned. Our enrollment is relatively stable with maybe slightly increasing numbers over the last several years.

MR Okay, and could you tell me if you have an overall school policy of, I guess some school districts call it a mission statement some call it a philosophy, I did interview some of your staff at K.I. Elementary and I did receive their mission, is there a district wide one?

SP yes there is... (tape is stopped for Mr. Peffers to locate the papers)

MR okay, so you did locate the mission statement?

SP yes, Gwinn Area Community Schools does have some belief statements as well as a mission statement that we follow as far as operations for our school. In addition, we operate under a set of goals and objectives that was first developed when I started three years ago and is annually updated and approved at our September school board meeting. The entire document will be copied and given to Mrs. Rosten before she leaves today.

MR Okay, and the title of that document?

SP is the Gwinn Area Community Schools Board of Education Goals and Objectives

MR okay, that will be on file at the archives at Northern Michigan University, thank you. I would like to ask you some questions on the improvements to your school district. I know that your staff has mentioned that there have been some ongoing improvements that have resulted from some grants that the school district has received and I was wondering if you could maybe expand on that a little bit.

SP sure, probably the most, the largest as well as the most well known grant that our school has been recipient of over the last six years is called conect C-O-N-E-C-T and conect is a comprehensive school reform initiative. Um, the grant funds were used for professional development, increasing technology available in our schools, as a result of the work that has been done in this project, both Gilbert Elementary and K.I. Sawyer Elementary schools were named, three consecutive years, national demonstration school projects. They were two of only nine school in the entire country that were named demonstration projects. The following year, when our middle school and high schools came on line with this project, we received the first, and as far as I know, the only designation as a national district demonstration study for conect, and conect is in several states around the country, there were, I believe there were over 100 school districts around the country that were involved in the project and many more buildings than that too.

MR thank you, what were the actual criteria being selected a recipient of this grant?

SP as is typical of most grants of this nature, that come from the state or the government level, it starts with need, and need can usually start with, not necessarily academic need, although that is one of the factors they look at, socioeconomic needs and our district right here,

we would meet a lot of those categories. We have a high number of students on free or reduced lunch, so the economic need in this area would be very high. Academically, our students do very well. We annually exceed the state parameters for MEAP test scores, ACT scores as well as national ACT scores, too. So academically our students have done very well, but they do qualify in several "at risk" factors such as low income, free and reduced lunch, and so forth

MR okay, and this grant was pursued by a member of the staff, is that accurate?

SP yes, I would give a lot of the credit to Kathy Lammi who is our special programs administrator. She is responsible for all of our special education, our title programs, other federal and state grants, and um, Kathy is the one who started on this, but received help from other administrative and teaching staff members to complete the grant, and when it was accepted, Kathy was the local manager of the grant for the six years that we had it. In matter of fact, this would be probably considered a seventh year. There were, there was a little bit of unexpended monies from the last year of the grant that they allowed us to carry over into a seventh year, so we've done some additional professional development, design teams in each building have also met a couple times this year to continue working towards the goals that were established during the project

MR okay, I just have a question on, you had mentioned the socioeconomics was a major factor on the reciprocity of this grant. What is done, beside technology to help, um alleviate, if you will, those risk factors you had just expounded on?

SP sure, um we have a lot of title one programs, okay, and again those are federal monies that come in because of some of our students being very high risk, we probably, I would say, on average, have more title one monies available than most schools in our region. That provides additional help in math and language arts for students, um we also look for any other smaller grants that we may be able to qualify for, some of them are no longer available, such as vocational grants, um I'm trying to think of the name of one of the others, um title's probably the largest. We receive some at risk funds for our students, those monies go into additional counseling, social worker positions and so forth to help our students.

MR and have you been, or do you know if the district has been receiving those "at risk" types of funding for a number of years, or is this post-base closure, or is there any connection with that?

SP no, they, we would have received those funds for many years, I would maybe just hazard a guess that per student it might be a little bit more right now, without any hard numbers in front of me, I would say since the air base has closed, that the economic need in the area is larger. We probably have more families living in poverty now than we would have had when the air base was here, due to lack of employment and the fact that we have a lot of new families moving into available housing at the base that have lower incomes to begin with

MR okay, and if we could refer to this influx of students that we were just insuating about, have you had a long-term relationship with most of the families that move in or do you see them coming in for a short amount of time and then sort of being more transient and leaving?

SP yes, surprisingly, the families, many of the families that are moving into our district are every bit as transient as they were when the air base was here. I mean, if you can picture a typical air base location, families are coming and going daily with the military. You would assume now, with the military gone and more permanent housing available that families would come in and stay here for longer periods of time. On some scale they maybe do, but we still have a very transient population compared to any of our neighbors around us, um we are actually almost 40 students down right now at the high school from what we started the school on. There are a lot

of reasons for that. One of the main reasons is just families moving out of the area, whether its back to where they originally lived or they've found something different that they want to move onto. But on any given week, in any one of our four buildings, we could have a half a dozen students move out and a half a dozen students move in.

MR now as an educator myself, I can relate some of the difficulties that may lead to in the classroom setting, on a district wide scale how has your district or your personal approach to this helped alleviate some of those teacher concerns and keeping a fluid academic progress?

SP sure, it's very very difficult because planning is so, long range planning is very difficult in this district because it's almost impossible to estimate with much accuracy what your enrollment's going to be at any given period of time. What we have decided to do is just base all of our enrollment on the future as being a very flat enrollment, if we're lucky, we'll have a few extra students which is good. Hopefully, we're not going to decrease at all. A good example is, any given year and last summer, exactly, when the middle of July rolled around, we had exactly 1385 students enrolled in the district. Typically, we have around 1460-1465, for enrollment, so we were 80 to 100 students short. And any other district in the state, I would make the assumption, those superintendents would be frantically making cuts because 80 students short is a significant amount of state aid you would be losing and we were already in a deficit mode. Yet we know from our history over the last several years those students are going to show up by the time school starts. And, as luck would have it, the first day of school we started I think, about even, and by the time the first week was out we were actually up about 20 students. Now, we can't plan for that, yet we know typically that's what happens each year, and it just makes it very difficult when right now I'm working on next year's budget and trying to put together staffing pattern, yet if I look at the enrollment that's on our books right now, I should be cutting about 2 or 3 teachers, um, yet we're just taking a leap of faith that when school starts next September, those students are going to be there in the classroom

MR now, has the state, and I might be wrong on this, so please correct me if I am, I know that there are attendance days posted throughout the year that state financing is based on, and so how does your district, specifically respond to like you had mentioned major fluctuations throughout that school year?

SP sure, ah, the state attendance dates are the fourth Friday when the school year starts, which is usually works out to be the last Wednesday of September. And then, correspondingly, about the third Wednesday in February. And so on those two dates, we take a student count and our hope is that all the students that started school are still there and haven't left or we don't have some severe discipline problems and have students out on a long term suspension or expulsion. But that's what the count numbers are based on, so right now, already looking ahead to next year, the fact that we were down about 40 students from the fall on our February count, that's actually 25% of the state aid we're going to get next year so we're going to need an increase of students from last year's September count much less where we're at right now, to break even financially.

MR okay, so it does have a boomerang effect into your upcoming school finances.

SP it does, your state aid for the current school year is based on 25% of the previous February's count, and 75% of the current year's September count.

MR okay, thank you for explaining that. I know that gets a little bit chaotic in understanding finances. And then, could you please explain to me how or if the highly qualified or no child left behind legislation has affected your district with the need for title one, you had mentioned, I know those are deeply connected.

SP they are. Surprisingly, no child left behind has not had a major impact on our district, specifically. We have had, I'm going to say, around 15 teachers that have needed to take an extra course or take a subject area test to become highly qualified, but out of approximately 95 teachers, that's not a very large percentage. Overall, we have a relatively young teaching staff. Part of that is due to the fact that, when the air base left the area in 95, over the next 5 years there were two very large buy outs so that some of the more senior teachers took them retired or moved on therefore as they've been replaced now in recent years, we have less than a third of our teaching staff, out of those 95, have more than 6 years teaching experience. 2/3 of them would be 5 years or less

MR wow, okay

SP so anybody who has graduated from college in the last 7 or 8 years obviously has taken all of those tests, there was no concern whatsoever for being highly qualified. On contrast, we had a handful of teachers several special education teachers at the high school level that had to takes, but then you know for example, our chemistry teacher has been teaching chemistry for 23 years here, but chemistry was his minor. He had to go back and take the test so that he could become highly qualified. Yet our chemistry students excel at college, he's done a marvelous job. To me that doesn't make a lot of sense. Just a comical not, he was all upset because he got 1 question wrong on the test

MR (Laughs) I understand

SP but he didn't mind doing that, and outside of a couple of people there really wasn't much complaining about taking tests or whatever

MR could we talk about the student/teacher ratio? You mentioned you have 95 permanent staff, or average faculty members and you mentioned your student body

SP 1470, 1465 FTE's um, just within the last year our student/teacher ratio has gone up a little bit, it would still be below 20 when factor in all the professional staff such as counselors, title teachers so forth, but actual classrooms, elementary level we've gone up to the lower to mid 20s now and high school we're in the mid to high 20s for class size which is probably 3 or 4 more students than they've had in previous years that's due to budget cuts

MR right, and I would also imagine that what you had mentioned earlier about the predictability of your student body would be heavily related to your classroom size

SP right and in matter of fact, just this morning I was working on our current enrollment and by contract we could place a maximum of 28 students in a class at the elementary level, well, based on certain classes for next year, if every student comes back, that will actually fill sections, if we have any new students we're going to be in a position of having to hire a new teacher, or you know you could add another student or two to a class with an additional stipend to that teacher, which is common in most contracts, but um, you know our numbers are pretty much at the max for our staffing pattern that we would want to use for another year, so either enrollment holding, if we get additional students, the ideal scenario would be to get about 20 new students all in the same grade

MR right

SP and unfortunately, that never happens. Usually it averages out, so if you had 20 new students, there's one or two per grade, well that may actually cause you to have to hire 2 or 3 more new teachers, which is actually more of an expense than what you're going to receive from the students. You know, in contrast, to lose 20 students, or even 40 students out of the high school, you could make the assumption that that's at least one full time teacher you could cut, but when you take 2 students out of this class 1 student out of this class, and so forth, it doesn't

change the number of sections you have of any given subject, yet you just lost 40 students worth of state aid

MR right, that transition from the enclosed classroom to the more transitory classrooms

SP and if you save anything at all, it's maybe you didn't have to buy as many textbooks or something, which are a minimal expense anyway

MR and usually purchased several years before the actual reduction in numbers

SP right I've been very envious of, in some respects of, from a planning perspective I've been envious of some of my neighbors because if you look at Marquette, or Negaunee or Gladstone, they can predict, with very close accuracy, exactly what their enrollment's going to be for next year. And therefore, what their revenue will be on state aid. They know the birth rates in Marquette, they know incoming transfers and outgoing transfers are at a much lower level each year than what they are in our district. And that's even more so in communities like Negaunee or Gladstone that they are similar size to us in student population

MR could we talk about that transiency a little bit... is there a predictability in the pattern of where the students are mostly coming from? Are they coming from other districts within the UP, or are they coming from maybe downstate or out of state entirely?

SP um, it's relatively even across the board. They're coming from all over, and now to be very sensitive to many of the families that are coming in, Sawyer, former air force base, provides a lot of what is called affordable housing, therefore what we have seen in recent years, are families definitely in need of affordable housing are predominantly the families that are moving into this area specifically at Sawyer. They may be moving from Marquette, Negaunee, Ishpeming, Escanaba, Galdstone, ah from Iron Mountain, Iron Wood. They may be coming from Chicago, Detroit, or places in between. There's no one particular area where we've had a mass influx from, it's people in need of affordable housing in any of those regions have been have moved in especially to the Sawyer area

MR okay, and can we switch focus for a little bit to the discipline policies of the area and I wanted to correspond this to some information recently found from the K.I. Sawyer area, where the lack of law enforcement funding has caused a significant impact in that environment and in the elementary school, I know that serves little impact only because the children there are of such a minor age, but I would imagine in the middle school and high school levels you might be feeling more of a tax on that and I was wondering if you could talk about that.

SP we do, and surprisingly there's probably more at the elementary level than you would anticipate. There's a multitude of reasons for that. Again, one, I described the, and I don't want to say the typical family that's moving to Sawyer because we have families where both adults are in professional positions and do very well and they were looking to purchase a home in a nice quiet neighborhood so an officer's home has been purchased and they've met their goal, yet if you look to many of our other families that needed the affordable housing, some of those families have been families who have been in contact with law wherever they have lived, and now we have a larger group of those people, all in one place, coupled with the fact that lack of funding for law enforcement, and it's not epidemic to Marquette County, it's throughout the state... everything we talked about in finances as far as schools, townships, counties are concerned, its, we're all hurting, and it's all a byproduct of the poor Michigan economy, but um, our local police department, the Forsyth police department, which probably  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Sawyer is within Forsyth township, they have, they are down to I believe only 5 officers from an initial group of 7 and those 5 all rotate one week a month off, forced layoff, so any given day of the week, there's no police patrol out here for 4-6 hours during the night. Their shift goes off

between midnight and 2 and they don't come back on in the morning until between 6 and 8. Couple that with the fact that the Sheriff's Department has been cut back so severely that most of their work is just around the county jail and they transport prisoners I believe they have one road patrol: one. And that's only the 5 days during the week. Then you go to the state police. The state police has already had some cut back too. Yet in a recent meeting with the Lieutenant there informed us that 80% of their calls are at Sawyer, which means they are spending 20% of their time in all the rest of Marquette County. So when you end up with a, some of the deviant population we have right now at Sawyer, if you are someone who is looking to skirt the law on some of the activities you're involved in, it takes you a matter of a day or two to figure out the available police patterns and when you can do something and realize 'I've got at least two hours before the closest squad car can get here and solve this issue, maybe longer' I mean we've had some cases where some crimes have been committed and it's taken 5 hours to get a squad car here, so the lack of law enforcement in this area is a primary concern. I've talked about Sawyer but I mean we could go to any one of our regions out here in the south part of the county and say we could use more law enforcement there, as well. Fortunately, this summer there is a program that's been funded that will place 7 state troopers literally at Sawyer in two ten hour shifts a day for the whole summer. So we hope that will help a lot of the issues out there.

MR how have you felt that in the schools specifically, you mentioned the elementary school has felt that more substantially than I would have thought, if you could expand on that please?

SP sure, we have had, we have had assaults in elementary school, well um, we have had more physical assaults this year than we've ever had before. It's one thing to have a fight. Two kids of any age square off and push each other around, and fight. And, you break that up and you penalize the two that were involved. We have seen a dramatic increase this year in what are truly assaults. Where one student doesn't know anything is coming and the person who is doing the assaulting is beating them so severely that there may be medical attention needed. We have had a couple of expulsions and long term suspensions on those. We have a zero tolerance policy for alcohol and other drugs, in matter of fact I was just studying on a hearing for next week for a high school girl who came to school in the morning drunk and that's a one year suspension from school for our district policies. We do allow them to apply to get back in 90 days if they seek treatment and many of our students do that. We have at the elementary level, just two-three weeks ago we had an expulsion hearing for a sixth grade girl who brought a knife to school that met the definition, the legal definition of a weapon which is more than 3 inches long. We have caught elementary kids selling their ridelin pills, those bring big bucks on the open market. We've had break-ins at the school, people looking for meds that they can sell. We've had verbal threats against staff members that we deal with immediately and severely. I had a hearing this morning, we expelled a student for a verbal threat against a staff member. These are not issues typically dealt with by our neighbors here. And, for a while we could pinpoint most of those to maybe the Sawyer area, and in the last couple of months, they've opened up and these students come from any any location within our school district area, not just Sawyer. You know, downtown Gwinn, Little Lake area, south of town, I mean it's all over.

MR so have you seen, that leads me to my question, have you seen sort of a transgression of influence from some of the people that we had seen coming into the area that you had mentioned maybe had some contact with law enforcement officials prior to coming to this area, coming together, maybe forming coalitions that hadn't been established prior to that and now maybe infiltrating into the surrounding areas. Is that a hypothesis that you might share?

SP sure, we know from conversation with some of the original families that moved to the Sawyer area that when they moved there, there were two Sheriff's deputies that actually lived at Sawyer. They were provided with free housing, and actually had a sub-station right at Sawyer and that was in place for, I'm going to guess, two to four years. During that time, now again the population out there would have been a little bit smaller than it is now, but with the officers right there, people still talk about what a nice quiet community it was because the officers were right there with them mingled with the families, with the kids, everybody knew them, and they knew that the officers could be called, even out of their house, at any time of the day or night to solve issues. Now with nobody around... that's one of the things they're asking for is to go back and place some people permanently right out here so that there is always a constant police presence. We would say the same thing in downtown Gwinn where our department's been dessimated here too, we have issues with break ins and so forth even down here

MR so was there a connection between perhaps then, the reduction in Forsyth law enforcement to this increase in crime that you were talking about during the last few months?

SP it would be a combination of all of them, including Sheriff's Department, State Police too. Not just Forsyth

MR okay, and is there any relation between the population, the students that leave, you know you had mentioned you could at any point in time, see a dispersal of some of your student body, is there a relationship between those students that are committing most of the problems in your school district with those that are leaving? Are the ones that leave your trouble makers, so to speak or is that not necessarily the case?

SP not necessarily, if they are one of our trouble makers, usually they leave when we give them a long term suspension, for something that they have done, we also have some of our top honor students leave during the school year for a variety of reasons too.

MR okay, so it's not necessarily the same families that come in late that leave early. For example, you're not seeing a pattern in that regard?

SP no, but you, you probably, you will see especially from some of the families that are renting, let's say, but it would be renting not just at Sawyer, but in town, too, run into problems with families that will come in, will pay their first month or two rent and then it takes six or seven months of no rent and court proceedings before they can be evicted, they move on to another community and start the process again.

MR okay, thank you for explaining that because I don't think I would have seen that pattern, so thank you for that. Um, the teaching staff, you had mentioned, is a relatively young teaching staff, have you had a good longevity rate of keeping the, the young staff that you've hired on board?

SP up until last year, yes we have. I personally know every single teacher in this district, I've had conversations with them, know that almost down to an individual whether they live in Gwinn or a surrounding community. They really like working here in the school system, and want to stay in the school system. The exceptions to that rule would be a handful of young teachers who aspire to be administrators some day so if they get an opportunity to be an administrator in another district, they would leave. I have never had a teacher tell me that they would rather teach somewhere else because it would be safer or they had a better working environment, or anything like that. That's really not the issue.

MR well and it sounds like they have a very supportive administration

SP I would say the administration is very supportive. The, we have two teachers on layoff right now, two, young, excellent teachers and we really hope we can bring them back as quickly

as possible, yet again, looking at the budget, we may need to layoff a couple of more teachers this coming year

MR right, um, okay, I think unless you have anything to add that I have touched on, I think I've covered most of the areas that, um, are of interest. I don't know if you have anything else that you feel would be important for discussion.

SP I just, probably the, you know I've said this several times, but the, I am surprised at how transient the student population is in this district. Um, with the air base gone, but then again, as I have stated here just a couple minutes ago with the, um, some of the families looking at the, ah, affordable housing, just paying rent for a couple of months and then going through that cycle, you can see where some of those issues pop up.

MR that leads to a question I do have. Has proposal A affected your district in a specifically harder way than you would think it does your neighbors with, and I'll just elaborate for any listeners of the tape, Proposal A is the requirement to have taxes funded through the state and not based on property, school funding based on a state level rather than on property taxes.

SP I don't think Proposal A has hurt us any more than, or helped us any more than any other districts around the state, um, you know, again, it's for anybody who follows this, and as an administrator, I will complain as loudly as the person next to me that schools need more money, yet I also realize that there's no more money out there. That for schools to gain more money, some other area, whether it's county government, whether it's the state prison system, whether it's some other entitlements, they're have to take a decrease because there's no additional money out there. Now, to solve that, yes one of the ways is to go back and look at what Proposal A did. And maybe consider tweaking it a little bit based on the current economy. When Proposal A was passed in 94, the economy was just starting an upturn and we went through many years of great production in the state. The state reaped lots of money on the increased sales tax and so forth which was a boom to the schools. Well, when your production rate is really, really down, you're losing jobs, and the auto industry is almost to a stand-still, you're not making any money on the sales tax.

MR now, how is the lottery, you know this is something that I'm not very familiar with, but I have heard a lot about and I've been questioned on, myself, and I wonder if you could just talk about the, I don't know if it's a myth in the media or what it is that makes the current resident of Michigan believe that a huge contributor to school funding is the Michigan Lottery.

SP sure, it is. It is. 100% of the proceeds comes to the schools, but the myth is...that was not additional money. It was promoted by the state of Michigan and passed based on the assumption that this was going to be a boon to the schools that all money would go to the schools. All right, what the state neglected to do was to finish the explanation that for every dollar of lottery money we now give to the schools, we're going to pull back a dollar from the state general fund monies that we had been contributing. Therefore, on one hand, yes the state lottery spends, provides a lot of revenue to the school districts throughout the state, on the other hand, that's not any additional money over what we would have had if the general fund was still providing that.

MR okay so it was sort of take from one area and pull from the other

SP that's right

MR okay, well thank you very much for your time, I appreciate it.

SP sure