

THE NEW FACE OF DISTRICT 220



Barrington's School District 220 has a new face. On July 2, Dr. Tom Leonard began his new job as the district's superintendent. After a lengthy search that included community-wide input, Leonard, the former principal of Barrington High School, was hired from a pool of more than 40 candidates from across the country. • • • The district was looking for a strong educational leader who could connect with the community. School board president Brian Battle says, "Tom clearly emerged as the desired candidate. His compelling vision for the future of District 220, coupled with his existing knowledge of our community, impressed all of the board members. We are confident that Dr. Leonard is the right person to lead our district for a long time to come."



An Interview with New Superintendent Dr. Tom Leonard

— BY LISA STAMOS —

When Tom Leonard began his new job in July, he wasted no time in getting right down to business, setting up meetings with key constituencies including students. “There has not been a day where it feels like I’m going to work,” Leonard says. “I can’t imagine any time better spent than in conversation and learning with students.”

As we spoke, it was very clear that Leonard picked up his love of teaching from his mom, and that he brought that love with him before he even set foot into his own classroom.

Though he does not have any children of his own, Leonard cares for the educational well-being of 10,000 students a day throughout school District 220.

A resident of Lake Barrington, he has worked at a variety of northern Illinois high schools. Leonard has a “knack for math,” as he puts it, and his math major was a springboard for plentiful job offers beyond college. “When I graduated from college, everybody needed math people,” he says. “I was being recruited by Hewitt Associates with an offer three times the income that was being offered at Crystal Lake Central [his first teaching job]. But I knew I wanted to teach.”

Leonard attended Niles Public Elementary School, where his mom taught first grade, then went on to Notre Dame High School. His love of math turned into a bachelor’s degree from Northern Illinois University, where he also picked up minors in education and political science. He holds a master’s degree

in secondary math education and a Type 75 Administrative Certificate. Leonard received his doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Loyola University. Additional coursework includes areas of administration, education, math and computer science at Notre Dame University, Loyola University, and University of Illinois.

Wherever Tom Leonard has worked—be it a high school in Crystal Lake, Deerfield, Highland Park, Libertyville, or here in Barrington—he has one goal: To leave the school he works in better off than how he found it.

We wish Dr. Leonard well. To help us all become better acquainted with this high-profile leader in our community, we offer our readers an exclusive QB interview with Dr. Tom Leonard.

Lisa Stamos: What or who was the inspiration behind you becoming a teacher?

Tom Leonard: We had a great childhood. Things were simple. We had two working parents, which in that day was unusual, but they always made time for us. Dad was a wonderful guy. My mom, Lita Leonard, was a first-grade teacher at Niles Elementary School for more than 30 years, and she was an amazing person. Many of her qualities helped me to know that teaching was something I had to try—and I just loved it. She took education seriously and also said that the most important people in schools are first the kids, and second the teachers, then third the cooks and custodians. The administrators are a distant fourth. She always said that children are our greatest gifts.

LS: What is it about Barrington students that inspired you?

TL: These kids! I’ve been in six or seven high schools, and I’ve visited many others in California, New York, even in France. But in Barrington, you go into the schools and you notice that the kids are happier than I’ve seen kids in most other locations. They smile. They just have such big hearts. Look at the amount of time our kids volunteer. And the way they care for one another.

LS: You mentioned that you whistle on your way into school every day. What are you thinking or feeling as you walk in that door?

TL: I am always happy. What I’m thinking: You’re healthy, you’re seeing nature, you’re seeing the world around you, you’re walking into a building where you know you’re going to be working with kids. What could be better?

LS: Since you started in education, what changes have you seen?

TL: The pace has changed—technology is a double-edged sword. It’s wonderful and it’s going to be here forever, but you have to control it, or it will

control you. Kids grow up faster today. It’s sometimes sad. They’re used to things happening fast. The world that we’re living in now is very different from the one our parents lived in. The way we communicate has changed. We can’t even envision the technology that our kindergarteners are going to be seeing when they’re 40 years old.

LS: Your online policy manual includes information on curriculum requirements. How much does curriculum really change?

TL: There are basic core subjects and basic life skills, like how to play well with others, that remain constant. Kids spend a lot of time in school—they learn team work. They need to learn how to be leaders. Our mission statement is about inspiring all learners to achieve excellence. It’s not saying in which areas they will excel, so it’s a dynamic statement. For one kid it could be the arts. For another it could be sports, or science, or accounting. And part of achieving excellence is being a good human being, and being a good citizen. That’s all part of what our curriculum has to deal with—it’s not just all $x = 5$.

LS: What strengths do you feel you’re bringing to your new position as superintendent?

TL: I have a good understanding of schools. Growing up with a mother who was a first-grade teacher, teaching at a lot of different levels, and being an administrator in different scenarios helps. I was a school board member for a K–8 school for nine years in the Lake Forest area. During the last couple of years, District 220 has had me oversee the middle schools. I have very good common sense, a good sense of humor, and a positive outlook—and I have an uncanny knack for anticipating things, which allows me to better prepare for them. I don’t know where that comes from, but it enables me to



District 220 superintendent Dr. Tom Leonard visits with Arnett C. Lines School principal Jill Schweiger before school resumes.

sometimes see where the landmines are and to avoid them. I've got a way about me that has always allowed me to find common ground with people.

LS: Some people might be concerned that your focus will be on the high school, since that's where you came from.

TL: Will I focus solely on the high school in this new position? No. When I was at the high school, my job was to focus on the high school. And when I was told to expand that to focus on the middle school and up, I focused on both. Now my job is to focus on the entire district. A wise man knows where his weaknesses are. I understand that my strength is high school, so I have to make sure that I have other people who complement me with their strengths in the other domains. And that's how I'll approach it. When I got the job, I went to my secretary at the high school and said, "Get me into every elementary school as fast as possible." I canceled most of my activities at the high school because they already knew me there.

LS: The demographics are changing in the student population, and you also have diverse student needs to meet. What do you see?

TL: It's daunting if you think about it. We have a diverse group of kids and programs to meet their needs—everyone from special education to gifted. We are changing in Barrington. The number of kids who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program has increased—not dramatically, but slightly over the past few years. There's wealth in this community, but there are also other hard-working people who are struggling to survive. We have kids attending our schools who are homeless. I don't think that most people are aware of this.

LS: How do you go about meeting all of these needs?

TL: It isn't just me trying to meet all these needs. We have quite a few people in this district working in different places to accomplish this. My job is getting the right people with the right passions in the right places. And we have people who are passionately dedicated to kids. No matter what their

role is—when there's a homeless child in the Village of Barrington, we have teachers who are donating money out of their own pockets to make sure that kid is okay. We have people who spend long nights making sure that an AP student or a gifted fourth-grader is getting whatever they need so they're not bored but challenged. We have structures in place—they could be improved—to make sure that all children have what they need to succeed.

LS: What about the average student?

TL: There is always the fear that an average student is going to fall through the cracks. I heard that same concern in Libertyville, in Highland Park, and in Deerfield, so it's not unique to Barrington. We survey our kids at several levels, and the surveys suggest that we're doing a pretty good job meeting their needs. It comes down to going from "good to great" [as described in the well-regarded business management book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins]. Programs like freshman advisory and the Freshman Integrated Learning Experience try to connect each student to a caring adult. This fosters a sense of belonging that helps each student succeed.

LS: What are your goals for hiring teachers in the district?

TL: When I look back at those six years [as high school principal], we were in the process of losing legends. I don't want to name names because I'll forget someone—they were absolutely fabulous people. It just turned out that because of their age and years of experience, there was a dramatic turnover. One of the things I'm most proud of is that during that transition we kept our test scores solid, we increased the number of kids taking AP courses, and we increased the number of kids getting higher scores on AP courses at the same time we were hiring the best and the brightest. At the high school we've hired the next generation of legends. These young teachers throughout the district are fabulous and so dedicated. It's our job as administrators to make sure we are recruiting, hiring, coaching the best people and then letting them work their magic in the classroom.

LS: What do you think parents are looking for?

TL: I think parents want to make sure that we have a school district with people who care about their kids. If parents know that a teacher cares about their child, problems and concerns seem to melt away. I think they understand that we're trying to meet a lot of needs with limited resources. If something is going wrong at school, we will partner with parents and not build walls between us. There's no reason for that, since we share a common goal—doing what is best for children.

LS: What is your perspective on the business side of running District 220?

TL: This is a big operation. We have nearly a \$110 million budget this year. We cover 72 square miles. We have more than 1,100 employees scattered among 12 schools and one administrative building. We have almost 10,000 kids entrusted to us. We're serving lunch meals to more than 3,000 people every day. On the business management side, the district has been consistently improving over the last seven to ten years. Again, look at our state financial ratings or our Standard and Poor's report. We are solid, stable...but we always have room for improvement. We can learn from the business leaders in this community, and we need to seek out their expertise.

LS: Who do you report to?

TL: Technically the school board. But first you report to yourself. You've got to look yourself in the mirror every day and know that you're doing right by yourself. I'm going to do the best job I can because I can't look myself in the mirror if I don't. But, as my mom said, it's the kids who are the most important entity in this school district. They are what drew me here. But I know it's broader than that. I know that the staff depends on me in many ways—they have to. The mistakes I make can hurt them all. This community depends on me, whether they have kids in the schools or whether they don't, because there are things that we can do as a school district to uplift the community and there are things we can do that can bring the community down. And we need to partner with the community because our futures are intertwined.

LS: What is the state of the school district today?

TL: People should know about our school district—against any benchmark you want to use, there is a strong argument that we are getting better. There is no doubt that there were times in this district's history where things were not going the way they should have gone. But if you look at us financially, four years ago we were at the second-to-lowest rating that the state has for districts in terms of financial status. Now we are at their top rating. Our bond rating with Standard and Poor's—and you don't fool those people—has increased over the last three to four years. We've gone from a 7 percent fund balance to a 30 percent fund

School Board President Brian Battle

*Balancing the needs of our community's children
and our community's financial resources*



Brian Battle understands the art of investments. As the managing partner of Great Lakes Associates, he works with high-growth companies to provide financial and management resources and leverages his experience to navigate them through the planning processes. He has an MBA from Harvard, which he explains helped him master critical thinking skills more than anything else. He has also served as the CEO and board chair for five companies.

Yet it's Battle's love of community that has him invested in many Barrington organizations, including being recently re-elected to the District 220 school board, this time as its president. Battle joins six other board members: Penny Kazmier, vice president; Sam Oliver, secretary; and Jeff Church, Tim Hull, Jeff Nordquist, and Cara Richardson.

"I truly enjoy the time I spend on the board," Battle says. "The seven board members are a cohesive group of dedicated volunteers trying to make the best decisions for the best interests of the community. We often enjoy spirited discussions!" And time they do spend. Battle estimates that most board members spend between five and 15 hours per week in meetings, meeting preparation, and independent reading.

Battle, the school board, and new superintendent Dr. Tom Leonard work together on District 220's priorities, which include financial planning, facilities management, and education initiatives. Communication is also a top priority. "In my current role as board president, I hope to help the board develop an improved manner of communicating and connecting with our community," says Battle.

Hiring Dr. Leonard is part of their planning. "Tom shares the board's desire to change the nature of the dialogue between the district and our community," say Battle. "I am confident that the community leaders, parents, and district residents will see Tom as the educational leader we expect for our schools."

In addition to his role with the schools, Battle serves as a coach and is a member of the Barrington Youth Baseball and Softball board. "I love the atmosphere of baseball," he explains. "It combines fun and education while strengthening our sense of community." Battle, his wife Kathleen, and their two children have lived in Barrington for 16 years. Their children, Brendan and Delaney, attend Station Middle School and Lines Elementary School.

"I believe our residents want the district to be responsible for both the education of the community's children, and the funds the district receives. As a board, we face a continuing struggle to balance the evolution of our educational curriculum with the prudent management of the community's financial resources. I believe this is central to the board's role. Our residents expect the district to develop responsible plans, and communicate those plans effectively. This board is committed to do just that.

Dr. Tom Leonard discusses football with coach Gary Rizzio, a Prairie Middle School technology teacher.



balance this year. That's critical, because when we hit July we don't have to borrow money at interest rates to pay our payroll while we're waiting for our tax receipts to come in. We have enough money in the bank that if we're in real trouble with a roof on a building, we fix the roof. A business has to have that.

Newsweek has listed our high school in the top 1,000 in the nation for the last two years. Our ACT and SAT scores have been solid; our AP results have been good; our middle and elementary test scores are over 90 percent in the "meets or exceeds expectations" category on state exams. In terms of how we're maintaining our facilities, the condition of our buildings has been improving over the last six or so years. We still have needs—we're not done yet—but we are a strong, stable organization. I think some people really need to take a second look at how we're doing. Schools are different than businesses. We have different input and we have different ways that we need to work. Still, there are elements from the business world that we need to copy and work with, and we are—for example, in more consistent data analysis and cost/benefit ratios.

LS: What are your thoughts about the taxpayer's perspective?

TL: I wasn't here 15 years ago [when the district's reputation was struggling]. I do believe in my heart that people in education—whoever was here and whoever was making all the decisions—were trying to do what was right for kids. I just believe that. JFK talked about himself as being an idealist without any illusions. We know we need to build trust in our community by showing that we understand the realities that they're dealing with.

We understand that property taxes are tough, especially for people living on fixed incomes. Yet we know that seniors care about kids and that people without children care about kids. But they are also stressed. They're not going to support the school district in terms of the things that we need unless they believe that we are using well-thought-out, practical approaches and that we are looking to the future. What we're building now is not only for the kids who are in our schools right at this moment, but for the children who are going to be here in ten years.

I think that if we can make sure that we are connecting with the taxpayers and communicating our long-term goals and that we are being fiscally responsible, they will understand that we have a job to do...to care for our greatest gift in this community, and that's the kids. That's our job—and we better do it right. And taxpayers have a duty to help us do it right.

LS: What are your top priorities?

TL: First, we have to maintain the great work that is going on in our classrooms—keep the "magic" happening, and don't let anything interfere with that. At the same time, in terms of growth and facilities, we have a couple of issues. The early childhood facility at the Woodland building in Carpentersville is not comparable to the other district buildings. Right now it's a safe building, it's a healthy building, but it lacks air conditioning, electrical capacity, and other features we've come to expect in our buildings. The situation becomes more compelling because Woodland serves our neediest children at the far edge of our district. This is a mandated program for our 3- to 5-year-olds with very special needs, many of whom have a very long bus ride. Intervening early is the most successful strategy for these students and will save us so much later.

We also have to look at the district's growth. Over time, we have been growing—nobody can doubt that. The enrollment data shows positive linear growth from around 1990 to 2007, and outside professional demographers keep us apprised of future growth trends. At our middle school level we have an issue. That's why we've gone for two referenda trying to get middle school buildings—we own the property at Kelsey Road for it. We won't be able to give the parents in this community what they deserve unless we get another facility built. That will probably be our focus.

LS: What else could be better?

TL: The vast majority of the areas in our district have a good level of accountability, but not all of them—we've got to raise that up in some places. And the first person who has to be accountable in this district is me. We've tried hard to communicate well with the community, but we're not where we need to be. And a big part of that communication is making sure that we are really listening.

I would challenge people: You know Standard and Poor's doesn't increase your credit rating if they think that you're weak. The state has a formula that they use in terms of looking at fund balances; we've had balanced budgets for the last ten years. Go into our elementary schools and walk through them—they're beautiful buildings. Go into our high school. We're like any other business—you don't have a \$110 million budget unless you're also having the auditors come in. We have people looking at our investments; we have people doing five-year financial plans; we have a five-year facilities plan. We're looking at staffing five years out. Many things have improved in the past seven to ten years, and I intend to improve them even more.

LS: How does the health of a school district affect the overall health of a community?

TL: To me, school districts have the most significant role of any organization in a community when it comes to defining the values and identity of the community. Realtors use the good reputation of Barrington schools as a selling point. We have people who live in communities on the edges of our district who would like to send their children to our schools—they would pay tuition to attend if we would let them. That speaks volumes.

School districts and communities either elevate each other or bring each other down. If the school district starts falling apart, then the community starts falling apart and vice-versa. My mission must be to make sure that we're doing everything from the school district side to ensure that we elevate ourselves and the community.

And the community needs to realize that they are invested in this, too. If we can't have schools we're proud of, kids we're proud of, and kids who are doing productive things as opposed to destructive things, then we'd better stop and reconsider. There's a big difference between having kids who are

collectively donating 40,000 hours a year of volunteer work in the community or having kids who don't care. So we either work together, or it doesn't work. It is an extremely important dynamic.

LS: What about sports and after-school activities?

TL: Co-curricular involvement is extremely important, especially in large high schools. Whether a child is on the chess team, in the band, or on the football team, co-curricular activities allow students to explore passions while they connect to their school community. Students learn to work with a team, make lasting friendships, be challenged, learn leadership skills, and engage in healthy productive activities.

We had remarkable sports programs the last couple of years—we were in the *Chicago Tribune* sports section I think more than any other school. People who live all over the city are asking me, "What are you doing out there? We're reading about you all the time!" Patrick Lee [a 2007 BHS graduate] was the number-one student-athlete in the *Chicago Tribune's* list of its top 20. I'm asked, "What's going on in Barrington? You've got these unbelievable academic kids and unbelievable athletes, and the arts are fabulous?"—this is something we can all be proud of.

LS: How prevalent are drugs and alcohol in District 220, and what can we do about that issue?

TL: Any community with 3,000 kids in a high school that says they don't have any kids who make unwise choices with drugs and alcohol is lying to you. Is Barrington something out of the normal? Absolutely not. We are not different in this realm. In fact, I would argue that we are healthier than most suburban high schools. Our statistics and data show that. It doesn't mean that we don't have problems. We are working hard with every resource we can to make sure our kids are making healthy choices. That's number one. If a kid makes an unwise decision, we're going to get him or her back on track. If we have a student that we do not believe we can help get back on track, and that student is going to harm himself or others, we've got to find a way of taking care of that situation. And this may mean that they're not going to be in Barrington schools.

What people should know is that we do monitor student behavior. We survey internally and anonymously every two years, and we share the results with the community to see what trends are emerging. In the last six years we have developed a better relationship with the police and fire departments in this community. We have a security system in the high school and in our middle schools that's better than most schools will ever have. We have people who think of every contingency possible.

LS: You said it is important to improve communication. How accessible will you be to members of the community?

TL: No matter who's trying to contact me, people have access to me. When I was at the high school, if I got a phone call or an e-mail from a sophomore who had questions for me to help with a speech, the student would be startled to learn that they could get in to see me early the next day. I don't care if it's a third-grader who has an idea or the CEO of a company—great ideas come from everywhere. I may not always agree with people—but they will always have access to me. I have learned an important lesson from both school districts and from some politicians: I will not allow myself to get insulated from the community. My direct phone number and e-mail address are on the district Web page. It's 847-842-3588. Maybe I won't be here in my office, but there is voice mail 24 hours a day. I also check e-mail constantly. My e-mail address is tleonard@cusd220.org.



District 220 Board of Education president Brian Battle (left) with Barrington High School head football coach Joe Sanchez (center) and superintendent Dr. Tom Leonard (right).

LS: What would you find unproductive in dialogue with members of the community?

TL: Even when I have been involved in difficult conversations with the community—like those that centered on middle school attendance boundaries—I tried to find common ground and to understand the arguments that others were advocating. I believe that most of the time, 99.9 percent of the people are great people in their hearts and mind. Sometimes they don't understand some things, and sometimes we need to understand their perspective. I think the one thing that can be unproductive is a situation where a mistake has been made and we can't get past it. I can't focus the time and the energy that I have dwelling on past mistakes. We have to learn from them, yes. Do we have to live with them every single day of our lives? No. Failure or going under is not an option. These are our kids. If we have made mistakes, then we've made them. Let's get on with it! We as a school district have a duty to be up front with people, to be honest, and to acknowledge things. But at the same time, I'm going to look forward.

LS: What is your outlook for the district?

TL: This is a great district. It really is. It is stable, solid, and strong. But there are definitely a few places where we can be a lot better. My goal is to make sure we're better off when I leave here than when I got here. The way I try to approach my work may be found in one of my favorite quotes from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"To laugh often and much;

To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;

*To earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;*

*To appreciate beauty, to find the best
in others;*

*To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden
patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has
breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."*

That's who I strive to be.

To contact Dr. Tom Leonard, call 847-842-3588 or e-mail tleonard@cusd220.org. To contact school board members or for more information about District 220, go to www.cusd220.org.