

Family Enrichment Meeting 5-15-07 BJ WALKER COMMENTS

BJ Walker has been in Georgia as the Commissioner of DHR for three years. She came here from Illinois where she last worked for Mayor Daley in Chicago, and before that worked on a task force to reform the Illinois welfare system in advance of the federal welfare system reforms of the mid-90's.

She came to Georgia, in her words, "...to work for a man of faith who would be willing to stand on principle in the face of a storm."

Her whole personal and work mission is centered on a belief in the redemption of families. The old style welfare system considered many families unredeemable, and consequently had to be scrapped.

However, this belief in the redemption of families is based on an understanding that, while every family should get a shot a redemption, we cannot let families step outside the normally accepted boundaries of societal behavior, since that is not productive behavior. Our mission should be centered on how we can support the efforts of families to get work and stay employed.

From her work in Illinois BJ learned the following:

1. Know what your goal is. It can be audacious and important (she supports that philosophy) but it must be grounded in reality.
2. Create a negotiating environment.
3. Do *authentic* work by attacking a **real** problem. Solve one or two real problems so that you can look back at the situation and see that you have actually accomplished something positive.
4. Use leverage to extend the resources you have currently available in your attempt to solve the problem.
5. Have a sense of urgency. Nothing is ever "on fire" at the federal or state governmental level. However, at the local level **everything** is **always** on fire!
6. Have a moral imperative that you always keep in mind. (Her suggestion to us was: Nobody should **have** to live in poverty – no family, no child, ever.)
7. Measure what you do, but measure only what really matters. She likes "dashboard measures" – three to four big items that you can quickly scan to see if progress is being made.
8. Dance on the lines. "Gray" is your friend; black and white is not. Operate in the gray and concentrate on moving the line that separates black from white in the direction that you want it to move.

Other counsel and wisdom:

- Pilot when you don't know; implement when you do know.
- Put your words on the lips of your leaders.
- Teach people to do the new work you require.
- Prepare for profound disappointments; you **will** have them.
- Deal with your conflicts early (use the ready, fire, aim approach – try something; if it doesn't work, scrap the idea and do something else.)
- Convert existing resources to your new work – the only way to do true reform.
- Get **champions** for the reforms in your middle level ranks. The B-team can either kill your work, or they can make it go. ("I was here before she came, and I'll be here after she leaves" attitude often kills the work.)
- Emphasis ought to be on a family's productivity – in school, in training, on their way to a job.

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Q&A Session

1. BJ has set up and worked with numerous family engagement/family resource centers in her career. What she has learned is that the center and its employees must know what the ***desired outcome for the family*** must be.
2. Don't bring too much into the schools. They have enough on their plates already.
3. Think "there is no wrong door" as an approach, not necessarily one-stop shopping. In other words, no matter what agency a family walks into, that agency can help with the particular issue that family has – the family does not get run around town chasing for a specific agency's help.
4. She defines productivity as being:
 - a. Getting and keeping a job
 - b. Training to get and keep a job
 - c. Helping the mentally ill to get and keep a job
 - d. Helping the disabled to get and keep a job
5. In other words, there should be **no excuse** why anyone in the community cannot get and keep a job.
6. The key to breaking the cycle of inter-generational poverty for BJ is very simply put: **Get every child to read at grade level by the end of third grade!**
7. You can't save children without first saving the adult. Shove those adults into the workforce by hook or by crook.
8. Design of reform does not come from families themselves; it comes from natural community leaders – clergy, non-profit heads, etc. Those in poverty don't have the answers. Getting them all into a room at once usually results in bedlam.
9. Family redemption typically comes from other family members – their children, other adults, their parents.
10. BJ is a big believer in the family mentoring process. "Safe Families" model, e.g.
11. Teen pregnancy: 40% of new Georgia families are started by either a teen parent, a high school dropout, or a single parent. The answer again lies in early education, so that in later grades these teens can comprehend what they are being told.
12. BJ's top three suggestions to help us end poverty:
 - a. Get everyone to work
 - b. Get all kids to read at grade level by the end of the third grade
 - c. Make sure every teen has a summer job.
13. Fifty percent of all health issues are influenced by our behaviors.

Finally, BJ suggested that we look at our ten initiatives as being supporting elements of an overall vision or mission (possibly of the new OneAthens), such as:

Athens is Conquering Poverty by:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Develop measurables off these three elements to track significant progress.

So, for example if we took on BJ's suggested top three, we might say:

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Athens is Conquering Poverty by:

1. Making sure that every child reads at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Every adult has access to a job and is gainfully employed.
3. Every teen in Athens has access to a summer job and is employed in one.

Thought starters for us all, no doubt.