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Daugherty gets Red Clay talking

New superintendent encourages communication with community, schools

By *EDWARD L. KENNEY*
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There could be little doubt that Merv Daugherty wanted to make communication a priority in his new job. A good indication of that came well before he took over earlier this month as the Red Clay Consolidated School District's superintendent.

Soon after he got the nod in March to replace retiring Superintendent Robert Andrzejewski, Daugherty began holding town hall meetings with community members, using the five-month transition period before his predecessor actually retired to introduce himself and lay the groundwork for continued dialogue.

"We're trying to be as transparent as possible," said Daugherty, who has served with the district nine years, including most recently as an assistant superintendent. "I just believe that the more we communicate with our community and our parents and our schools, the better their knowledge will be of what we're doing, and they will become more supportive."

During the transition, he met one-on-one with administrators from each of the 28 school buildings, visited schools and met with union representatives, PTA members and others.

"It was an opportunity to start the communication process we wanted to build," he said.

In a district that has been charged in years past with not communicating, Daugherty also started a Web site this month that is designed to be more user-friendly and interactive. By August, he plans for the site to include videos that will outline some of the district's programs.

"We want people to see what we do," he said.

To further open up communication lines, Daugherty established a biweekly memo to Red Clay employees to talk about what the district is doing. He also plans to run that memo online on the district Web site so other people can share in the news.

Establishment of a Superintendent's Parent Council, giving a parent representative from each school the chance to meet with him and then report back to other parents, is yet another example of his efforts to talk it out with everyone.

"I believe, with Merv, communication is important to him, and he has a strong conviction for what is best for kids," said Gerri Marshall, the district's supervisor of research and evaluation.

Providing more help for struggling students is another one of Daugherty's priorities. He started an enrichment program this summer, which ran from June 15 to July 1 at Baltz and Warner elementary schools. It gave struggling children in grades two to five a chance to improve their reading and math as part of a voluntary program to prepare them for the upcoming year.

And workshops for parents on how to help their children develop good study habits should be implemented by the end of September or early October, he said.

Daugherty also wants to curb truancy and improve the dropout rate, which is a national problem, he

said. He plans to meet with community members in an effort to achieve more success in those areas. The initiative began in earnest last school year. Speakers have been brought in to talk with at-risk students, and more mentoring is planned.

"I think it's an extremely big issue for us," said Daugherty, who was a teacher in Maryland for 14 years before coming to Red Clay. "We have one job, and that's to educate our children, and do the best that we can."

Another initiative Daugherty would like to tackle is improving vocabulary and reading comprehension as a way to increase student literacy levels.

"We don't need kids to read faster; we need them to understand what they are reading," he said. "We started working on that last year, and we are fully committed to it this year."

Daugherty, who has been allowed to slide into his job gradually as Andrzejewski handed off more responsibilities each week, describes himself as a hands-on manager. But he is also a team-builder who will seek input from those around him rather than try to take it all on singlehandedly.

"The four most important words we have is, 'What is your opinion?'" he said "I will make the decision, but I want the people in the departments that we hired to have an opinion.

"We are a very large district, so to manage that well, the people who report to me need to know that they are supported. But I also want them to think outside of the box and to think, 'How can I do a better job?' We're in a job that continually must get better and improve."

Diane Dunmon, the district's deputy superintendent for the past half-dozen years, believes the Red Clay School Board has picked the right man for the job.

"I think that he is very personable," she said. "He likes people. And in a district with almost 16,000 students and about 1,700 employees, that's extremely important.

"He's knowledgeable in education, and to lead a district of this size, that's critical," Dunmon added. "He's well-organized, and he has a vision of raising student achievement for all students. I know we all say that, but Merv really believes it."

Board President Irwin Becnel also has high praise for Daugherty, which is why he cast his vote in unanimity with other board members to appoint him to the post.

"He is calm, intelligent and perceptive," Becnel said. "But it was also his history with the district. He's actually familiar with the school district. With the unknowns, with the state finances and everything else, I was hoping we could avoid bringing in somebody new and having them scratching around trying to get their feet on the ground."

Additional Facts

MERV DAUGHERTY

Position: Newly appointed superintendent, Red Clay Consolidated School District

Age: 53

Residence: North Star

Education: Bachelor's in social science and education, Frostburg State College; master's in administration and supervision, Salisbury University; doctorate in innovative leadership, Wilmington University

Family: Wife Kimberly, two grown children

Starting salary: \$162,000
