

On a Clear Day

By Kim Woodward, ISBA President



If you ever drive through a desolate part of the U.S., say Montana or Idaho or middle Florida, the endless nothingness can dull your mind. Even when driving, it's hard to concentrate on the road because of the monotony. I learned once (maybe in high school science class) that it only takes about 3 miles of uninterrupted terrain at sea level to see the

curvature of the Earth. At that distance, like Ferdinand Magellan proved, you can watch something large moving toward you that rises from barely visible to full view, proving that curvature exists. A trick for those long, endless drives through nothingness is to concentrate far in the distance to watch the phenomenon of Earth's curvature. Or, you could just listen to a crime podcast. Your choice.

In writing this, my last *Journal* article, I tried to think of what looking ahead in leadership might encompass. And, as with previous articles, a few tips and pointers began to emerge. I learned that a tall vantage point, a tall target, proper air temperature, and a clear line of sight are all requirements for maximum viewing distance. I also learned that the place on Earth believed to have the longest line of sight is Mount Dankova in Kyrgyzstan to the Hindu Tagh mountaintop in China. You can stand on the top of one of these two mountains and see the other mountain a whopping 334 miles away! That would be like standing in Indianapolis and looking over at Cleveland, OH!

Convert that line of sight to leadership, and leaders would be able to oversee a massive operation with relative ease. While details would be fuzzy, one could discern forests from plains, snow from rain, populated from nonpopulated areas. So, what can we as leaders learn from this?

A HIGH VANTAGE POINT

Increasing the height of our leadership observations can increase

our maximum line of sight. It is the job of board members to stay at that higher vantage point for Superintendents and administration. Recently, my board was contemplating a security change that had our administrators easily seeing both sides of an argument. Rather than getting in the weeds, board members serve best if they increase their line of sight to future actions and long-term goals.

Action Steps:

- Ask questions about long-term impact: What would happen if we just stayed at status quo? If we don't solve this issue now, what challenges will we face in the future?
- Don't get lulled into minutiae. Ask for high-level overviews rather than detailed explanations.
- Encourage administrators to look beyond the present issue to the future solution.

A TALL TARGET

The fact that a taller target is more easily visible is intuitively obvious. Next time you're trying to navigate to a city, just look for its skyline. School governance is best defined in larger, broader goals and objectives rather than smaller, narrower ones. You may be able to see that a taller target is needed in your school corporation's strategic plan. If you have a broad, less restrictive goal of "increase academic proficiency annually using a number of key metrics," you will probably hit that target and drive to higher and higher excellence, year over year. But, if you have a more specific (or restrictive) goal of "increase reading and math scores in standardized testing by 2% annually," you may or may not hit the mark.

Action Steps:

- Don't compromise the loftiness of the goal but, instead, make the measure of success large enough that everyone can focus on it.
- When you're lost, look to what you already know and can see, and then navigate from there.

PROPER AIR TEMPERATURE

In line of sight refracting, light passing through a medium of different densities causes light to bend and focus in unpredictable

ways. Think of a mirage: the blacktop ahead looks like it has deep water but, in fact, it is only the hot air at the surface and cool air higher up that makes it appear this way. So, your board's climate will be important in making sure the vision and focus are true and predictable. It is not uncommon for board members to not like one another personally, or to disagree. But it is important for the overall school corporation health and productivity, that the climate in the board room be conducive to giving your best efforts in governance.

Action Steps:

- Focus on doing your part to create the right climate in the board room.
- If something appears in the distance, make sure to revisit it when you get closer as it might have been a mirage. Practice reassessment and redeployment.

A CLEAR LINE OF SIGHT

The very thing that makes the drive in Montana boring is the very thing that makes it effective: there's nothing in the way to impede your sight. When there are things to look at to obstruct the

view, you can't see far enough to be effective. In boardsmanship, this means that you need to maintain a focus that is centered and not too far in any other direction (especially backwards!). Practice good focus and discernment.

Action Steps:

- Don't look at the trees OR the forest. Try to stay focused on a path you and your fellow board members have identified.
- Celebrate successes. While focus on a course of action is needed, make sure that wins are recognized and that you encourage the heart of those working hard for your school district's success.

I have been humbled to serve as ISBA's board president for the last two years. The caliber of elected school board officials in our state has never been greater, and the voice with which we speak has never been stronger. Thank you, sincerely, for all your support, ideas, and healthy and constructive dialogue during my term. I cannot wait to see where ISBA and Indiana public education are headed next! 🎓

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