



THE SCHOOL Administrator

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The Architect of a "Profoundly Different" System

By Jay P. Goldman

With a leadership style that one admiring colleague calls "fired up," Suzanne Freeman has enjoyed an unusual experience for those in the superintendency — building a school system from the ground up.

Freeman, a lifelong educator in Alabama, has directed the birthing process in Trussville, a community 16 miles northeast of downtown Birmingham, where a bustling new school district opened its doors to 4,100 students in August 2005. Before the secession, the students were part of the 40,000-student Jefferson County district.

She had spent the four previous years as superintendent in Cullman, Ala., and wasn't looking to move on. But, she says, the opportunity to create "profoundly different" learning experiences appealed to her sense that public schools must find new ways to engage students and to promote lifelong learning among those who work in schools.

Freeman has been absorbed personally in the quest to identify better instructional models. She's been an eager participant for the past six years in the BellSouth Superintendents Leadership Network hosted by the Schlechty Center in Lexington, Ky.

"We talk a lot about designing what engages kids, to see a purpose in what you're learning, that you're not learning algebra just for the algebra but to see the applications, to make the learning meaningful," Freeman says.

Freeman was hired to create the district from scratch about 10 months before the start of the school year. She hosted exchanges for parents to discuss their aspirations and for her to talk about the learning experiences that people will need to succeed in the "flat world" detailed by best-selling author Thomas Friedman. She used his book, as well as Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, with her school board, central administration and the principals of Trussville's four schools

to fashion a solid foundation of shared beliefs.

The superintendent gave a laptop to every teacher and the training to integrate the technology into instruction and communication. All teachers have their own private and public web pages, and some classes are using blogs to further students' exploration on topics. "We have unleashed creativity (and) risk taking in a safe environment," she contends.

But Freeman admits such dramatic changes in the classroom have "scared to death" some teachers, most of whom moved over with the schools the new district inherited. "Sometimes we only know what we know," she says. "When we have only one mental image, it's hard to picture what schools can be for kids."

To expand those horizons, Freeman has accompanied a handful of administrators and up to 45 teachers on a chartered bus for the last two years to Indianapolis for a "Working on the Work" conference run by the Schlechty Center. Freeman herself attends professional development sessions three times a year with the BellSouth network. As she puts it: "If I expect others to be continuous learners, I need to be."

George Thompson, president of the Schlechty Center, finds Freeman's passion contagious, saying, "There's a sense of excitement she personally brings to the role."

School board member Dennis Hill adds: "Everything's driven by what's best for children and the world they'll face. It's her calling, a driving force."

Freeman had a somewhat parallel experience earlier in her career, when as a 27-year-old, first-year principal, she opened a new primary school in Auburn, Ala. The positive vibes from that experience, she admits, led her to tackle the Trussville launch.

As in any new entity, Freeman fully recognizes the importance of relationship building. Though the school district is expected to almost double in size in 30 years, the superintendent is doing everything in her power to keep the hierarchy flat and the collaboration strong. As such, she insists all staff members address her by her first name. "If they don't, I fuss at 'em."

Jay Goldman is editor of The School Administrator. E-mail: jgoldman@aasa.org

BIO STATS: SUZANNE FREEMAN

Currently: superintendent, Trussville, Ala.

Previously: superintendent, Cullman, Ala.

Age: 42

Greatest influence on professional career: Being a member of the BellSouth Superintendents Leadership Network with the Schlechty Center. George Thompson and Phil Schlechty have become true mentors to me. They share information and ask the right questions, which enables me to reframe obstacles into opportunities and be very deliberate about my next steps as a leader.

Best professional day: At our leadership team retreat during the summer of 2006 when members shared real-life examples within our district about how our colleagues live our beliefs on a daily basis. I knew then our district was poised for greatness.

Books at bedside: Jefferson's Children by Leon Botstein; Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell; The Ten Faces of Innovation by Thomas Kelley and Jonathan Littman; and How Full is Your Bucket by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton

Biggest blooper: When reading e-mail late at night, I thought I was replying to an office colleague about my frustration with the State Department of Education, but instead I forwarded my e-mail to the state superintendent. After many apologies and the state superintendent's gracious understanding, I have learned the lesson of choosing my words more carefully.

Key reason I'm an AASA member: I value professional learning and networking experiences that AASA offers. This enables me to continuously grow professionally.

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