

# History of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation

By: **D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | December 12, 2006**

The Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation is similar to the Blankenship leadership approach in that it has evolved into a grassroots-based, heavy personal involvement, highly iterative, creative group process thinking, high performance work team.

The many key individuals with diverse talents and interests have converged into this cohesive organization and pounded out a collaborative strategy that has already and is continuing to produce outstanding results.

This week's column builds on the foundation of last week's examples of early collaboration in the Oak Ridge Schools. Blankenship knew the value of high performance work teams and knew how to form them. He also knew how to provide an environment conducive to their healthy growth. The same concepts are at work in today's ORPSEF efforts.

However, the community is even more heavily involved today.

The basic mission of ORPSEF is to invest in our public schools by financially supporting programs that enrich student learning, encourage staff development, and enhance innovative technological and instructional programs to set the standard of excellence in public education. The foundation bridges businesses, families, and the schools to allow the community to invest in our children and the future of Oak Ridge through education. The charter of the foundation is set up so the foundation cannot replace public funding in providing the essentials of a strong educational system; rather it is intended to supplement those public funds.

Working with the school board and city of Oak Ridge, the foundation set out to raise \$8 million in private funds to enhance the committed public dollars to create a national model of a 21st century high school. This goal was reached in February.

The focus now is on the second goal of fully funding an endowment at \$4 million to support technological advancement to promote improvement through all levels of the Oak Ridge public schools system. Ron Townsend of Oak Ridge Associated Universities and Jeff Wadsworth of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory have agreed to co-chair the fundraising for the endowment. These two gentlemen are key leaders in our community and are dedicated to helping assure excellence in education.

See the high performance elements? See the substantial results being produced? Blankenship would be proud!

But, this foundation working at its present high degree of successful performance didn't happen over night, and certainly did not always operate so effectively. Looking at the history of how the foundation evolved might be a good education for others seeking to emulate such a successful endeavor. Let's take a look back at the history of the foundation and at some of the key individuals who have contributed so mightily in the transition to its present status.

Former Oak Ridger and school board member Barbara Phelps conceived the idea of an education foundation for the Oak Ridge public schools. She said, "I realized as I was serving my first term on the school board that the tenor of the City Council was changing and that we might be hitting a ceiling of tolerance for raising property taxes — at least to pay for schools.

"Because of that, I felt a nonprofit partnership between public education, business, and community leaders would work well to help us fund some things we could no longer count on from the city. I felt we needed something new to raise the community's conscience about public education in Oak Ridge ... I saw the foundation as a way to engage people in that agenda."

Note the same type thinking as Blankenship's workshops regarding increased awareness of the people in the community!

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Although Barbara had the original idea, she readily states that many others came to the table in the first couple of months of organizing the foundation before they settled on the first board. Among them was fellow school board member Tracy Larrabee, who has continued to assist the foundation in numerous ways.

The foundation was chartered in March 2000. A significant amount of enthusiasm from the community resulted in a full membership of the foundation board and the creation of a mission statement and goals. Jim McCarten was the first chairman, Tom Clary was the first vice chair, and Robert Poe was the first treasurer.

While the foundation continued to exist in 2002 and had been working on issues in support of Oak Ridge schools, Barbara Phelps was leaving her pivotal role and School Superintendent Randy McCoy was also leaving. The foundation felt the loss.

The new superintendent, Tom Bailey, arrived July 1, 2002. In October 2002, remaining members of the foundation were facing the question of time and commitment to make the foundation successful. The majority of the board resigned or had moved out of town by then, and the foundation was at a critical juncture.

At about this time, members of the community began to realize Oak Ridge High School was in danger of losing its reputation as a leading public secondary education institution because of several reasons, not the least of which was the age of the facilities and the lack of state-of-the-art technological capabilities. Academic standards and performance in the school continued to be high but the infrastructure had a number of serious deficiencies that required immediate attention. I distinctly recall a tour Ken Green provided where I participated and saw the huge cracks in the walls and the other serious structural defects the buildings exhibited.

The concerned citizens used the shell of the old education foundation to reorganize for the purpose of supporting a fundraising effort for the renovation of the high school. This was something that was entirely unique and required significant out-of-the-box thinking. Again something that Blankenship would have applauded.

Now, here is a key turning point in the history of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation! There was a dinner at Jeff Smith's home in the summer of 2003. Wadsworth, Thom Mason, Billy Stair, Bailey and Green were guests. Interesting to note was the realization that the Oak Ridge High School played a critical role in the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's ability to successfully recruit scientists to the laboratory. Again, something that Blankenship would have immediately identified with as the Manhattan Project faced the EXACT SAME PROBLEM!

One of several key insights at this pivotal meeting was provided by Billy Stair (who just last week was awarded Oak Ridge's most prestigious award, the Muddy Boot). Of the people at this meeting who looked at the problem, Billy's view may have been the most succinct and his fresh approach the most convincing. He realized that Oak Ridge had two distinct characteristics. First, people were very proud of their history and, second, they were extremely proud of the superiority of their education system. He stated that the high school was Oak Ridge's strongest asset and that making a substantial improvement there would be the best possible way to promote the city of Oak Ridge and thus the laboratory as excellent places to live and work.

Billy went on to suggest that when recruiting scientific personnel for ORNL an "average" school did NOT impress them. The schools had to be not just good, but the BEST in the country to attract the level of scientists needed at ORNL for the laboratory to take the lead in the many areas of basic scientific research they were anticipating.

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Billy Stair has gone on to cite the present situation in Oak Ridge as being a unique “moment in history,” when a lot of key positive elements are aligned. As he accepted his Muddy Boot Award last Friday at the East Tennessee Economic Council's annual meeting, he noted that ORNL's Jeff Wadsworth, Y-12's George Dials, NNSA's Ted Sherry, ORAU's Ron Townsend, DOE ORO's Gerald Boyd, and other key community leaders are all striving in the same direction toward positive change in both their individual organizations as well as the community. The high school renovation offers a most visible evidence of the results of this unique “moment in history” that Billy sees as so vital to our future success.

Now, let's go back to the results produced from the key strategy meeting at Jeff Smith's home. It just so happened that the Oak Ridge City Center referendum failure had just occurred so the foundation felt the City Council had to be convinced that a referendum could pass.

A comprehensive poll was taken and analyzed, and the results were amazing. Ninety-four percent believed maintaining a high quality high school is important to the city's economic future. Therefore, the foundation knew a referendum to support school improvements would pass and it did later, in August 2004, when 73 percent of Oak Ridge voters approved the bond referendum and the sales tax revenues to fund the project to renovate the Oak Ridge High School.

Now we, as a community, were off and running. The result of the referendum was proof that the sky was the limit regarding education in Oak Ridge.

Next week we will continue our exploration of the history of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation. We will be brought up to date on the successes and even speak briefly of the future.



Ongoing construction and renovation efforts at Oak Ridge High School will once again provide state-of-the-art education facilities for our high school students