

Oak Ridge Schools – a rich history, a promising future

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 15, 2009)

Alden H. Blankenship, a graduate of Columbia University in New York City, was hand-picked and hired as Superintendent of Schools for the Oak Ridge location of the Manhattan Project by General Leslie Groves in July, 1943. Groves would have only the best. Blankenship opened three schools in October, 1943, the high school, Robertsville and Elm Grove.

Blankenship too, would have only the best. He first hired Mildred R. Kidd, also from Columbia University, who created the curriculum for the schools. He next hired the high school principal and the elementary school principals. Herbert Dodd was among the first hired. He actually led the efforts to start each of the schools at the personal request of Blankenship. Consistency was important even then when rushed to get schools in place - no less than excellence was accepted.

Dr. Blankenship and Mildred R. Kidd wrote in *Adventure in Democratic Administration*, Section XI titled *The Task of Leadership*, "The school system was actually built and operated on the assumption that members of the teaching profession can and will do an effective job of developing a complete school program when they are given time, opportunity and encouragement." This "task of leadership" remains a standard of excellence for Oak Ridge schools.

Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian wrote in, *Historical Sketches of Oak Ridge Schools*, "What made it work was that the administrators trusted their qualified staff and gave them the freedom and tools they needed to teach. The parents were young and very interested and willing to be involved in the education business and to help as volunteers wherever they were wanted. What resulted was that the bar was set very high those first four formative years in terms of academic standards and expectations. Yet the goals could be realized because of the unusually high quality, both of a select staff and of a select student body." These high standards remain our "bar" today!

The Oak Ridge Schools started with a most unusual requirement, they had to be top-notch, absolutely nothing less was acceptable. Groves demanded it. Blankenship saw to it. Groves was smart enough to give Blankenship his head and encouraged him to reach for the sky - and that he did!

Trusting the staff in the "workshops" (group meetings where decisions were made by consensus of those educators who had to implement the decisions) was unheard of in the culture that existed in school administration organizations of the 1940's. Yet, Blankenship did what he felt intrinsically was the right thing to do for the situation he was in at the time. He made an excellent choice!

The same is true today for Oak Ridge schools. Historically, Oak Ridge schools began with the standards so high that only the very best teachers and the very best administrators could guide the educational process sufficiently to achieve the standards. The children who were placed in the schools by the scientists, engineers, craftsmen and others who brought their families to Oak Ridge to help win that awful war, were obviously given the best education possible at the time.

An odd thing was already beginning to happen to Oak Ridge schools. As I look at the records of those first four years of the "adventure" in leadership, the facts are clear. Something amazing was going on here. Levels of involvement by parents were unprecedented. Engagement by the education staff was outstanding. Communication between parents and school administration was unailing and effective.

The concept that drove the first Oak Ridge schools to excellence must be the same for us today. It was well understood by the Army that bringing the world's best scientists to Oak Ridge would mean the school system had to be as good as from where these scientists were coming, being even better was a plus and was the standard being used. No schools could be better than Oak Ridge schools. Blankenship understood this. Groves demanded it. It was important to the war effort and that made it essential.

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So, how does this concept of excellence in education fit our present situation? The driver is a bit different, but the concept must be the same. We cannot rest on our past history, regardless of how great it was. What Blankenship did was right for his time. It was refreshing and it got the attention of the educational staff and the parents.

We must do the same today. The educational staff and the parents along with the city staff, the community leaders, the businesses, the Chamber of Commerce in conjunction with the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation must pull out all stops and seek the highest possible standard of excellence.

The different drivers are the changing demographics of our community, the changing standards from the state, the actual quality of our schools and the desired end state for the students. The initiative being postulated by the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation in partnership with the Oak Ridge schools to focus on efforts to sustain the strong reputation of the schools and maintain broad community support can be a vehicle to lead to the promising future of Oak Ridge schools. The high standards of the Blankenship era remain today!

This collaborative effort has already resulted in efforts to inform the community with factual information about the issues plaguing our school system today and to highlight how the school administrators, principals and teachers should respond to them. Sounds like a replication of the Blankenship "workshop" approach to me! It is just updated to the 21st Century.

Oak Ridge schools began with the Manhattan Project when all things were new and the times were such that creative ideas abounded. Over the years, the history of innovation continued, the multitude of challenges were met and overcome. Blankenship set the standard for recruiting and hiring first-rate and highly qualified staff. This has continued to be a hallmark of Oak Ridge schools over the years.

Determination to succeed against all obstacles has been the stalwart position of the administrators, staff and teachers as well as the students over the years since October, 1943. Oak Ridge was formed as part of an unprecedented effort to create the world's first atomic bomb. This initiative demonstrated what we, as a nation, can do when we focus on meeting a common objective.

On a smaller scale, the Oak Ridge schools of those first four "adventure" years of intense and creative leadership proved what can be accomplished when parents, school administrators and teachers as we; as the communities focus on meeting the common objective of producing a superior education opportunity for the students. We can do that again!

Born as a part of the tremendous Manhattan Project legacy, Oak Ridge schools has continued to reach high goals in all aspects of education. Oak Ridge students demonstrate tremendous achievement potential and are routinely recognized as high achievers. Our changing demographics make it imperative that we maintain our focus on achievement, even when Oak Ridge Schools must include all students, regardless.

That is the crux of the situation. Testing to the new state-wide standards will include ALL students. So, the creativity that Oak Ridge Schools has demonstrated with naturally high achievers must also be demonstrated across the board to ALL students. This is no small challenge, it will tax resources, it will demand extraordinary dedication to purpose by the educational staff - not only the administrators and the teachers, but parents must also be engaged as well.

As Oak Ridge schools prepare for this newly defined future, our community is no less facing a challenge than did Alden Blankenship. Remember that he had no idea who would be coming as students, only that

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he must create a school system that was considered as good as, or better than, ones from where these families had moved. He did it. We must also assure our schools are the very best.

Now Oak Ridge schools must achieve success for EVERY student, regardless of the background, the previous educational success or the family situation. No small challenge, indeed! Blankenship's model updated to today's realities is a must.

One of the historical strengths of the original Manhattan Project approach to establishing Oak Ridge schools was the plan from the outset that schools would be located in neighborhoods and would be a central element of that community. The concept worked.

Today, we still have neighborhood schools to a large degree. That same concept still works. Schools must be seen as a hub of the community. Families, teachers, administrators, students and community leaders must be of one mind regarding the schools. Communication is a key element of that relationship.

Joint school and community events and "workshops" with the neighborhood relationship in mind are key elements of maintaining that close neighborhood concept. The history of Oak Ridge schools reflects the commitment to education as one of the top schools in the nation.

Each neighborhood must identify closely with their school as representing that high and lofty ideal...one of the best in the nation. Anything less will result in failure for that neighborhood. Remember, the standard and bar are set HIGH. We must all strive to achieve the goal of educating ALL students.

Historically, parents' expectations set the standard of excellence. Regrettably, today we may have lost a bit of that driver as parents often do not seem to be as engaged in their children's education as those families were during the Manhattan Project. While this is undesirable, like the changing standards, it is a fact that must be dealt with.

While the enormous pressures of economic realities require parents to expend more effort just earning a living, the parenting requirement to assure quality education cannot be relinquished. Parents must demand the highest quality possible from their neighborhood schools. Any lapse must be dealt with promptly and thoroughly.

However, as important as it is for parents to recognize their responsibilities and hold the schools accountable, promoting the positive aspects of excellence in education will go much further than just watching to find failures. We must do the one without leaving undone the other.

After all, parents, our children are more important than that. They are our primary responsibility while they are being educated. Their ability to carry on our genes to the next generation with successful careers, healthy families and the way they raise our grandchildren are all at stake. We cannot fail them!

I am glad to see the community response that resulted in the renovation of our high school. What a tremendous outpouring of community support. That accomplishment was unsurpassed in any community in the nation or the world, for that matter.

We, Oak Ridgers, have proven time and time again that when united our common strength is gigantic, our desire for accomplishment is unparalleled, our concentration cannot be matched and our intense dedication to a cause is so complete as to cause anyone watching us to run away in fear – we are that overpowering when focused. We have fire in our eyes and our commitment to results is seen in deliberate action. That characteristic is rare!

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The Manhattan Project to end World War II, winning the Cold War, nuclear nonproliferation, scientific achievements such as medical isotopes, understanding radiation exposures and how to cope with disasters, how to provide logistical support to troops in war, how to bring rocks back from the moon, how to propel a silent submarine, unprecedented basic scientific discoveries and literally thousands more innovations that impact the world in a myriad of ways are all products of Oak Ridge. We ARE unique!

We CAN also effectively and promptly address our recently developing educational issue crisis. Let's just do it! Won't YOU join personally in the effort to support our schools and help meet the educational challenges of today and the future? It IS important. It is VITAL! If you are not already, don't wait any longer, GET ENGAGED!



Alden H. Blankenship, first Superintendent of Oak Ridge Schools – whose leadership forms our model for today and the future

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New main entrance to Oak Ridge High School – our educational pride and joy!