

District can set an example for others

When Superintendent Jim Rydland took over the West Aurora School District one year ago, he said the prevailing sentiment he heard from teachers, students and parents was this: "I need to be visible."

That charge has meant more than shaking hands with people in the stands of high school football games and dressing up in funny costumes in a show of school spirit, although he has done this, too.

It means Rydland is supposed to be the accessible public face of a district that has had its share of problems communicating with residents, most notably in 2003 when the School Board voted on a boundary change the Kane County state's attorney's office said might have violated the Open Meetings Act. Why? Because officials failed to tell the public the board was going to take a vote.

We have heard no complaints about Rydland's visibility during his short tenure here, and he has by appearances worked hard at being an open, accommodating leader. Yet a recent survey offers lessons to both West Aurora and any other district mulling over whether to go to referendum. The West survey found that many taxpayers aren't ready to support a referendum because they haven't been given enough information about what the district intends to do with their money.

Rydland responded by suggesting the district will redouble its efforts to "engage our community."

"Feedback will make a difference on how we make our decisions, and ultimately what decisions we make," Rydland said.

Such a response shows the power residents have. It's clear the survey response impacted the district's decision on seeking a referendum, which now appears won't appear on ballots until April 2007. That gives the district time to make sure its message is clearly, accurately communicated to the public.

The survey was a unique first step in beginning a dialogue with the public. We haven't seen such effort from many local taxing bodies. Now, West must take the next step. By engaging as many people as possible, the district can set an example for other governments to follow.

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