



Letter: The three ‘F’s’ as opposed to the three ‘R’s’

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Fluff, frills and froth are a more apt description of what is ostensibly touted as benefiting education – much less professional development – at the National School Board Association (NSBA) annual conferences.

Certainly so in light of the savings to be had, had the members of the Clover Park School District board just stayed home.

The “How to deal with difficult people seminar” for example – one of the takeaways from the National School Board Association (NSBA) annual conference held last year (2014) in New Orleans, Louisiana, attended by four of the five members of the Clover Park School District Board of Directors (CPSD) – is the subject of a book by Robert M Branson entitled “Coping with Difficult People.”

It’s available for \$5.49 at Wal-Mart just down the street from the CPSD administration building where the school board meets.

The four-and-a-half-stars (out of five) rating for this “Proven-Effective Battle Plan That Has Helped Millions Deal with the Troublemakers in Their Lives at Home and at Work,” is also available on Amazon for a whopping \$0.01 cent.

One penny. “Used, Very Good” condition, for one cent.

Sure there’s \$3.99 shipping but that’s for sending the book, as opposed to sending four board members to learn about the subject of the book: \$10,040.36.

In fact, for a few more pennies, a school board member, anybody who works with anybody, “even alone on an island you need this wherever you are” according to the book promo, you can also add to your shopping cart (all 4.5 stars) “Working With You is Killing Me: Freeing Yourself from Emotional Traps at Work;” and “How To Reduce Workplace Conflict And Stress: How Leaders And Their Employees Can Protect Their Sanity And Productivity From Tension And Turf Wars;” and “Dealing with People You Can’t Stand, How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst.”

The whole issue here is about, at least in significant part: frugality, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul being an example.

“Just because he has it, doesn’t mean he’s compelled to spend it,” writes Paul Bedard in the Washington Examiner a few days ago (Feb.20) of Paul who has now returned, since taking office, a total of \$1.8 million in unused senate office money (paper and print cartridges among them) to the U.S. Treasury.

“Because we can is not good enough.” was likewise the title of just one of now five articles taking to task local authorities who spend because otherwise the money might be returned; or because, after all, it’s for a good cause; or extend a conference call to drum up enthusiasm for neighborhood revitalization; or whatever reason – in the case of the CPSD – that might be given for going to NSBA conferences where, after all, they’ve always gone before.

“Communicating fiscal responsibility and effective resource stewardship,” (CPSD Board Goals and Expectations #3, board minutes, November 25, 2014), is commendable.

But shelling out – and selling out – \$44,606.75 for a total of 14 CPSD board members to attend the last four – and the one upcoming – NSBA conferences, is not that. Said conferences are neither fiscally responsible nor are they effective resource stewardship.

They’re perks.

In 2008, according to Lakewood City Council minutes, councilmembers would hold their annual retreat at Alderbrook Resort and Spa on Hood Canal where “farm fresh scrambled eggs with Tillamook Cheddar Cheese and Chives, pork sausage and pecan smoked bacon” is served. And that’s just breakfast for what would be a two day extended council planning meeting. When challenged to explain this perceived extravagance, one council member responded, “it’s a perk.”

Ironically ‘perk,’ as used in a sentence, is a malady that afflicts not only city administration but also those charged with education: “It points out the unspoken truth that being allowed to teach less is provided more as a perk than a necessity.”

The (heretofore) unspoken truth about NSBA conferences is that they are perks, most certainly not necessities.

Complainers (may their fiscally-conservative tribe increase) prevailed. Council retreats are now held at City Hall.

Members of the CPSD board should likewise stay home thus lending significant credence to what is meant by Goal #3.

There is no more a connection between spending to attend NSBA annual conferences and the supposed professional development of CPSD board members, than there is any connection between spending more money for education and student outcomes.

“No discernible correlation,” observes Andrew Coulson of the latter.

Coulson is the Director of the Center For Educational Freedom at the CATO Institute, “a free-market think-tank based in Washington, D.C.”

The outcomes Coulson says, referencing a 40-year study as evidence, do not correspond to the expenditures.

Not in funding for education.

Not in sending board members to conferences.

Why, as [Rob Nikolewski](#) writes in a Fox News article of April 7, 2014, is there “no relationship, effectively, between spending and academic outcomes,” per Coulson?

Because any communication or education style – and the funding, underwriting or otherwise spending – that removes responsibility for the result from the learner and places it instead on the lecturer is doomed to failure.

Occupying space at a conference does not a more competent leader make.

Booking-it does.

The CPSD, as has here with regards conferences and their attendant expenditures and as has been documented elsewhere, is certainly not alone in believing – wrongly – that going somewhere equates with learning something.

The CPSD is just the latest example.

When the City of Lakewood promoted in late-2011 the “All-City Community Meeting” which was held in the spring of the following year, the avowed purpose was that everyone should convene to discuss “how the City and leaders can work together to improve neighborhoods.”

It happened once, has never happened again, and that’s good because differences are made not by where you sit in a chair at a conference but by how rolled up are the sleeves on your arms.

Committing personal time – over time (and a cup of coffee) – at a computer researching and reading on whatever subject of interest – or whatever is required to become more than you are – engages the mind, disciplines the body, saves money, and ultimately and most likely achieves the desired end.

Flitting about the country reflects poorly not only upon frugality, but also demonstrates what it means to be mechanistically un-savvy.

We live, after all, in a high tech world – the Internet – whereas conferences are at best low tech. With so much available at our fingertips via computer at home, and books – the things students use in school – why spend so much to park the posterior of board members from the district of Clover Park somewhere else?

It is not unreasonable, at all, to ask staff – beginning with the school board – to save more by spending less while taking advantage of technology, thus taking money out of the conference room and investing – where it belongs – in the classroom.