

Eugene School District 4J's new Superintendent Sheldon Berman hasn't seen *Waiting for Superman*, the recent film that advocates for public school privatization.

"Charter schools are not the answer," he says.

He has read *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Diane Ravitch's book last year that slams billionaires' efforts to privatize schools and increase high-stakes standardized testing.

"I thought it was a brilliant book. I would recommend it to anyone and everyone. I think she's actually right on," the former social studies teacher says.

Replacing the retired George Russell, who had a background in human resources, Berman has hung his office with diplomas from Harvard and pictures of himself with Bill Clinton and with Muhammad Ali. His shelves are stuffed with education books, including some Berman himself wrote on critical thinking, innovation and the development of social responsibility.

Near Berman's busy desk, an abstract print of two children running into each others' arms states: "Our Children, Our Life." The balding, affable educator in a tie is not much taller than a middle schooler.

After his first five months at the helm of a Eugene school district that just suffered budget cuts that laid off 60 teachers, crowding many classrooms beyond 40 children, Berman spoke with *EW* about his vision for education and 4J. Here's the Q&A, edited for length.

Most of the work is done by teachers. Do superintendents matter?

Do superintendents matter? (laughs) The superintendent as I see it is sort of the hub of looking at resources, looking at policy, being a bridge to the community, being a spokesperson for the district, helping to listen to what is going on in the district and being able to articulate it to others, looking at systemic strategies to advance the performance of students across the system. It's the connector to resources. Not only the fiscal resources, but the intellectual resources, the university resources, the partnerships with the research and development system, the vision to seek particular grants. I see it as a connective network kind of role and as a facilitator kind of role. I see it as one that provides leadership in terms of moving the system forward.

Oregon is going to apply for a No Child Left Behind Act waiver. What do you think they should propose?

The waiver is essentially an effort to get out of a punitive and a not very functional assessment system. When I was in Massachusetts (as superintendent for 14 years outside Boston), we had identified that by 2014, because of the way the analytical system worked, over about 90 percent of the schools in Massachusetts would be "failing" schools. Now that's just not realistic. That's a failed assessment system, because the schools had ever increasing performance. Actually, they were the top schools in the country.

The waiver allows us to create a much better assessment system — to take on the work of transforming the schools that are persistently low-achieving and design a system of support so that you move them out of that classification. It also allows you to give credibility to progress that schools are making.

I don't think that the federal "Race to the Top" grants (which Oregon didn't get) were directed to the kinds of changes that were the most productive.

Your predecessor had a report that said the Eugene choice system had left schools "poorer and browner." Do we have an issue there still?

The whole choice issue is one that we are looking into right now. We are exploring a number of things. One is how choice works within the system and, because of the new legislation (allowing students to attend other school districts), what impact inter-district choice could have and whether we should participate or not.

To some degree it (transfers) would have a positive impact. Eugene is a very appealing district. We have a declining enrollment. There is a sense we could serve more students. One of the things we are looking at is, will this enhance our resource base or not or will it compromise our current student body.

Politically, could it undermine the voting base for a bond measure if people say the district is just educating people from Junction City?

Right. Exactly right. But on the other hand, if we could say that we are bringing additional revenue into the district that offsets the requirements of the taxpayers here, that might be a positive.

Is there too much testing or is there too little testing?

I'm not one that opposes testing. We need to have assessment systems that track what we do. I've been in favor of high quality assessment systems, though, that enable us to really track students' performance, that gives us feedback on how students are doing in particular areas so we can address individual student needs. I don't think the current Oregon assessment system does that well for us. I think that is why people are looking at how do we change that system.

We should have one test a year, not three chances of taking it. That takes too much time. The best assessments are the assessments that are done in teachers' classrooms, that tell a teacher what skills they need to address.

Education needs to be accountable to the public. But the best accountability systems are accountability systems that give us the information to advance student learning. They are not just a number that you post. It's moving away from saying the test scores are the goal to saying that graduation is the goal, and college and career readiness is the goal.

We've made a commitment in this district that by 2021 we want to have 100 percent of our students graduate and be college or career ready.

If you did that, does that put pressure to graduate people that aren't ready to graduate?

No, that's why I said college and career ready. The diploma has to mean something.

Obviously, we need a diversity of routes to a degree. I have a Down syndrome son, and he would not have passed the math or the English reading test here. But he will develop the career-ready skills to get him into a position where he can contribute to society. That's the kind of emphasis that we have to have. It's not just about getting kids into college, it's about getting kids ready to launch into a career with the skills necessary to be successful.

Capella MARKET

NEIGHBORS-IN-NEED FOOD DRIVE

(in collaboration with St. Vincent de Paul)

HOW IT WORKS: We make two sizes of pre-packaged healthy-food gift packs, "Pantry Stuffer" (\$20) and "Protein Power Pack" (\$10). You choose a gift pack, pay for it at the register, and put it in the food barrel. St. Vincent de Paul then picks up the donated packs and distributes them. It's a simple yet very solid way to help out your Lane County neighbors in need.

25th & Willamette • 541-345-1014
8am - 10pm Daily • capellamarket.com

EAT OUT COME HOME

WEDNESDAY BURGER, FRIES & A PINT \$10

THE humble BEAGLE PUB

2435 Hilyard St.
Eugene, OR 97405
541-484-3062
www.thehumblebeaglepub.com

tues-thurs 5 pm - 10 pm fri-sat 5 pm - 11 pm
happy hour everyday 5-6pm & 9pm-close

4th ANNUAL

Holiday Sale

December 2-4

Friday | December 2nd, 3pm-10pm
Saturday | December 3rd, 11am-6pm
Sunday | December 4th, 12pm-5pm

Showing the work of over 35 local artists

Holiday Store

Open Everyday through the Holidays
222 Polk Street • Eugene, OR 97402
541-653-8089 • clayspaceonline.com

Safe Removal of Mercury Fillings

Wellness Centered Dentistry

868-2008

300 Country Club Rd Ste 290

Rob Whicker DDS

www.wcdentistry.com