

# Reporting Facts, Opinion or Creating Reality: Is the Truth Out There?

By Lisa Andrejko, Ed.D. , Superintendent QCSD Schools

When the school district was first approached about replacing Dr. Leight's *Free Press* column, I was hesitant. I informed Editor David Anderson that we would not be the forum for rebuttal for the many inaccuracies, disguised as facts under the excuse that they are the point of view (POV) of an opinion columnist. Most of this vitriol was old news or election banter. We were moving forward as a school district and community. I truly did not want such negativity to affect our students, how our teachers work with our children, or to influence decision making in the school district.

I have stressed about writing this response for many, many days. First, I know there are community members who have strong feelings about what they perceive to be the truth regarding QCSD as reported by opinion columnists and the usual detractors. I know nothing will change their minds. However, for future generations, I believe our instruction in the Pennsylvania Reading Standards will have an impact. "Reading Critically in All Content Areas" is Standard 1.2. Eighth grade students must learn the following:

*"Use media for learning purposes: Describe how the media provides information that is sometimes accurate, sometimes biased based on a point of view or by the opinion or beliefs of the presenter."*

I was warned, "Don't do it...they will come after you with a vengeance." Others encouraged, "You need to tell the community the truth." My conviction had always been that if you do the right thing, you should not have to worry about misinformation being spread by those with a less than noble agenda. I know we have done the right thing and I can no longer be silent.

The student issue first. As you know, our PSSA student achievement results at the high school increased dramatically this past year. You will hear about the future plans we have for further enhancing learning opportunities for high school students. Opinion columns in the past few weeks failed to recognize a few key issues regarding our 2007. First, graduation from QCHS is **not** dependent on PSSA scores in a test given 16 months prior to graduation in only two (math and reading) of the required 26 credits in a variety of subjects needed to graduate. Second, students who do not do well in the final PSSA taken in 11<sup>th</sup> grade must test again their senior year and nearly half of these students improve their scores to proficient or advanced. Third, 55 out of 402, or 14% of our students who took the exam in 11<sup>th</sup> grade had disabilities that required individual education plans (IEPs), and have graduation requirements for specified reasonable growth as measured by their IEP. Finally, the purpose of PSSA is for **program** evaluation, not individual student evaluation.

Next the Sunshine Act issue. If you check the officially approved minutes from the December 10<sup>th</sup> public meeting, you will note the following:

“A request was made to have a one hour presentation on Sunshine Law prior to the January 10, 2008 information meeting beginning at 6:00 p.m. Dr. Andrejko will contact a facilitator for the session.”

Please check our website for the minutes to verify the discussion that led up to this directive from the school board. Although such a board conference could have been a private session, interested community members, staff members, and the press were invited and encouraged to attend as it would be the perfect opportunity for an open forum to get answers to questions regarding the Sunshine Act. No deliberating, no decision making, no policy setting...just

information and an opportunity for all in attendance to ask questions. It was held in an open elementary school library...no closed doors. Members of the press, staff, and community joined the board to hear the presentation. The clear intent was not to have a closed meeting.

Under the Sunshine Act, conferences need not be advertised. Section 709 of the Sunshine Act states, "Public notice is not required in the case of an emergency meeting or a conference." This conference did not need to be "officially" advertised like voting meetings or hearings, although it was listed on our website and announced at a public meeting. Further, the Sunshine Act defines a "conference" as "any training program or seminar, any session arranged by State or Federal agencies for local agencies, organized and conducted for the sole purpose of providing information to agency members on matters directly related to their official responsibilities."

About 10 seconds into the introduction of the guest presenter, a published expert attorney in Sunshine Law, the line was crossed when a journalist moved from reporting the news or having an opinion, to deliberately **creating** the news himself. I must admit that I was shocked when Mr. Woldow disrupted the presentation scheduled to inform the board and audience about public and private meetings, the very object of his past criticism. His claim: The session was not a conference and was not advertised. We tried several times to continue, explaining this was a learning opportunity for all in attendance. Could it be he did not want the board and the attendees to hear the truth, thus discrediting his claims? His disruption turned to shouting and harassment of the presenter, board members, and me. We had no alternative than to move to a private session to seek legal advice regarding our options. I had many questions for the attorney: How could we continue with our scheduled conference? Had we indeed violated any law? Was

free speech an issue? Did we have any options for removal of a person disrupting a public meeting?

After legal advice, the board was confident that they had not violated the rules and wholeheartedly supported going through with the conference in public. It is important to note the board strongly desired to return to hear the presentation **with** the public and re-entered the library only to be disrupted a **second** time! With the legal understanding that although desired, it is not required to have a conference open to the public. Without any choice, the board adjourned to a closed session to hear as much as they could about the Sunshine Act in the remaining time before their regularly scheduled and advertised meeting. It was apparent that the board's goal to have a public conference had been sabotaged by one person. The public would have to wait for another time.

Since the disruption of the conference did not allow the speaker to complete his presentation on the Sunshine Act, the school district does plan to hold a public conference as we hoped, in the future. Although objections by the public or press are allowed under the Sunshine Act, those objections, once noted, cannot disrupt the public meeting to the point of stopping it. Should anyone disrupt the next meeting beyond simply voicing their objections, that person will be asked to leave and escorted from the room by law enforcement.

Additionally, there have been questions raised regarding the legality of my entering into a contract for legal services that exceeded \$100, even though I had been directed to do so by the board. Most every school superintendent in PA (as any private industry CEO) has signing authority significantly greater than \$100. The \$100 threshold exists from when the School Code was first written, back when \$100 bought much more than it does today. QCSD's practice is in-line with what other districts do and what we have done in the past, although no specific policy is

in place. As a practical matter, such signing authority is necessary as the board cannot seek prior approval for every bill or purchase of over \$100. I will ask the board to adopt a policy specifically addressing the signing authority of QCSD's superintendent. Incidentally, QCSD has always used the services of many legal firms for various purposes according to their specialty.

I was hopeful that the voice of the people in the last school election, the real silent majority, spoke. The outcome meant I was now blessed to work with three outstanding new board members, who are advocates for excellence and efficiency in education, elected with the two proven, veteran supporters of children and sound decision making. What could possibly interfere with forward progress?

Forward progress...the key action phrase. There are those who I believe want this community to live polarized in chaos, fear, and turmoil. They do not want our parents, our youth, and our new and lifelong residents to live together peacefully, to think for themselves and to see a strong and unified future for our community. They do not want our children to be problem solvers, critical thinkers, and collaborators. Such independent and forward thinking behavior from our up-and-coming citizens would represent a loss of control by the current detractors. Their "old school" belief in "do as I say and think as I do" would be threatened.

If the real silent majority does support forward progress, as I believe they do, they will tune out the opinions of disruptors who want to squelch that progress. Further, they will continue to seek out the truth and display the courage to form their own POV, not that of a manipulative, vocal minority. I will continue to provide accurate information through whatever means necessary for our community members to have the facts they need to understand the workings of the school district.