

SILOAM PROUD: 'It's all about the kids'

Superintendent Ken Ramey leaves a legacy of putting students first

by Janelle Jessen

Whenever a decision is to be made, Superintendent Ken Ramey is well known for guiding the discussion with the question "What's best for kids?" Now that his 52-year career in education is coming to a close, he is leaving a legacy of putting kids first through the many people he has impacted at the local and state level. Ramey came to Siloam Springs as high school principal in 1994 and then transitioned into the role of assistant superintendent before becoming the district's leader in 2001. He announced his plans to retire in January and will pass the reins to current Assistant Superintendent Jody Wiggins on June 30.

During the past 17 years, Ramey's many accomplishments include building a trusting partnership between the school district and the community, leading the district through a successful millage increase, overseeing the building of the high school and the renovation of the middle school, implementing the instructional facilitator program, developing the Career Academy of Siloam Springs and other career and technical programs, and helping the district's administrative team to develop a mission, vision and values, according to Brian Lamb, school board president.

Ramey has also been recognized as a leader in education at a statewide level, where he served on and chaired many legislative, curriculum and assessment committees. In 2015, Ramey was named Outstanding Administrator of the Year by the Arkansas School Based Health Department, and then in 2017 he was named the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators' Superintendent of the Year.

Tom Kimbrell, who served as Arkansas Commissioner of Education from 2009 through 2014, said that Ramey is one of his heroes—a statement that Kimbrell said often embarrasses his down-to-earth friend.

"He set an example I tried to emulate as commissioner of



Superintendent Ken Ramey speaks during a school board meeting in the fall of 2018.
Janelle Jessen/Herald-Leader

education—to focus on what's best for kids and put that first focus on academics."

Kimbrell said he was serving as AAEA executive director when he first got to know Ramey through the many committees on which Ramey served.

At the state level, Ramey always brought the focus of the discussion back to what was best for kids, even if it wasn't convenient for administrators or financially best for school districts, Kimbrell said. But his tremendous integrity is what really makes Ramey his hero, Kimbrell said.

Locally, Ramey brought a professionalism that permeated throughout the district and set an example for all staff members -- from teachers to custodians and bus drivers -- to work as a team to do what is best for kids, Kimbrell said.

"Siloam Springs was one of those model school districts that a lot of us

wanted to emulate and a lot of us wanted to be like," he said.

High school secretary and administrative assistant Cheryl Rakestraw said she has seen Ramey's heart for students and staff over the years.

She said the respect and love that staff members have for Ramey led his focus on "What's best for kids" to become the culture of the school district.

"Everyone highly respects him and I think everyone knows 100 percent why he's here -- it's for the kids," she said.

It doesn't matter what an employee's job title is, Ramey is ready to shake their hand or give them a hug and he is always interested in students and ready to give them a pat on the back, she said, describing Ramey as "humble," "tenderhearted" and a "good soul."

"He's always won everybody's heart and everyone just loves him," she said.

Choosing a life devoted to education

A native of Northwest Arkansas, Ramey was born in Fort Smith and grew up in Fayetteville. His parents, Carl and Theresa Ramey, chose to raise their two sons near the University of Arkansas because, like many people who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, they wanted a better life for their children.

"We had very caring parents," he said. "We didn't have a lot of resources, but we had a lot of commitment to my brother and me."

In eighth grade, Ramey had a teacher named Vivian Schurfanz who showed him what a big impact an educator can have on a student. She encouraged him to go on to college and her example led him toward a career in education.

"A teacher is so impactful, they can be so positive, they have such a way of influencing kids," Ramey said. "If they put care and concern behind their content it can really make a life-changing impact on a child and that's why I know, because it happened to me. I know it is still that way, and I firmly believe that public education is what holds our society together."

After high school, Ramey graduated from the U of A and started working as a physical education teacher and coach in the Fayetteville School District. He went on to spend the early part of his career teaching and coaching at a number of schools in Arkansas and Oklahoma.

"From day one, I always loved kids and always loved being around kids. Their energy kept me energized," he said.

As a teacher and a coach, Ramey was a fantastic mentor and role model who made a big impact, according to former student Paul Vitale.

Vitale, who now has a career as a professional motivational speaker and trainer, said Ramey was his high school teacher and football coach in Russellville.

"He was a role model through his excitement for life and the game of football and his excitement and optimism, challenging us all to be the best versions of ourselves," he said.

Ramey encouraged his students to get their work done on the field and in the classroom and was consistently there for them, Vitale said. He taught students to be timely and to never quit—characteristics that have served Vitale well in his professional life.

"When you talk about motivation and encouragement and the importance of having the right attitude, what he instilled in me as a student athlete had an impact on what I do professionally as a speaker," he said.

Moving into leadership

Ramey got his first opportunity to move into administration in 1978 in Prairie Grove, where he served as middle school principal, athletic director and head football coach. He went on to work as a principal in the Lincoln School District before coming to Siloam Springs.

"I was doing more leadership opportunities and learning and growing and reading and studying and observing others and watching how different situations were handled because there are so many things you can learn to do and there are so many things you can learn not to do and not to repeat by being mentored and learning through other people's experiences and through your own," he said. "I probably ought to ask for some forgiveness from some of those early kids who had to witness a young guy that needed to grow in his philosophies."

Ramey has a long list of educators who served to inspire and mentor him through his career.

"I feel like I am the product of so many other people who invested in me," he said.

Ramey came to Siloam Springs in July of 1994 as high school principal. During his first year as principal, he introduced the block schedule and developed the school resource officer program.

Ramey became assistant superintendent under Superintendent Randall Spear and then moved into the top leadership role when Spear retired in 2001.

Lamb was serving on the school board when Ramey was interviewed and promoted to superintendent. Lamb recalls that he expected an hour-long interview, but quickly realized it was going to take much longer when Ramey arrived with stacks of binders complete with detailed plans for the district's future.

"I was very impressed," he said.

As a leader, Ramey can be tough when need be and attack a problem head on, but he is also quick to reward people, build them up and value them, Lamb said.

"He has built a culture in the Siloam Springs School District and community of trust and knowing it's for the kids and knowing they are here to get

educated and we will do everything we can to educate the kids and advance them on," he said.

Lamb said he often uses the phrases "It's all about the kids" and "What's best for kids," in school board meetings because he wants to reinforce Ramey's philosophy and make sure that the most important thing doesn't get sidelined.

Perhaps Ramey's biggest accomplishment as superintendent has been building a trusting relationship with the community, Lamb said. That trust allowed the district to pass the millage rate and continue the improvements that have been made.

"His leadership is ethical, honest, he's open, and not just in the school board (meetings), with the staff, the community, everybody, that's just the way he is, Lamb said.

"It's all about trust and relationship," Ramey said. "Everything we do, whether it's in school with kids and families, or out in the community, it's all about trust, it's all about working relationships, it's all about partnerships. The more involvement you have in the community and the schools, the more you have adult participation in the schools and the more people see your heart and the fact that you are trying to make a difference for every child. Every child needs to have the ability to extend themselves and reach for the stars and reach for the moon, and be the best they can be."

Ramey possesses tremendous leadership skills, according to Charlie Abernathy, who served as high school principal for 11 years ending in 2013.

"He just has a way of making everybody feel comfortable and that you are the most important person in the world when you visit with him," Abernathy said. "He has that charisma of making you think you can tackle the world. I know a lot of that comes from his coaching days. He is just a tremendous leader -- always has been and always will be in my eyes."

Abernathy grew up without a dad and Ramey has become a father figure, mentor, leader, friend and colleague to him. Ramey's philosophy of doing what's best for kids has carried on in Abernathy's own leadership, he said.

Even as superintendent, a role that often doesn't have much day-to-day contact with kids, Ramey makes it a priority to get out to support students, whether it was eating lunch with them in the cafeteria, attending sporting events or touring the barn at the county fair to see the FFA projects, Abernathy said.

"Like the old saying, 'it doesn't matter how much you know until they know how much you care,'" Abernathy said. "I think everyone knew that Mr. Ramey cared for everyone in the district and wanted not only the best for kids but teachers, faculty and administrators."

Creating a culture of doing what's best for kids

To Ramey, his personal motto of "It's all about the kids," means making every decision with serving students in mind and implementing strategies to give children the best opportunities to be successful. It also means being a proactive researcher to find out what to spend money on to get the best results. What's easiest for adults isn't always what's best for kids, he said.

"Education has to be more of an investment than just dollar bills," Ramey said. "It has to be about being impactful. This whole community—with the love of this community and the can-do spirit of the community—says we can make a difference for every child. And that's what I want to do, make a difference for every child."

The school district's whole school, whole community, whole child model to meet student learning reflects Ramey's philosophy, according to Grace Davis, director of teacher quality and community relations for the district.

"He understands that for a child to learn we also must meet the physical, social and emotional needs and be committed to their families and connected to our community," Davis said. "He understands the interconnectedness of a child's

learning. He never hesitates to try something new if it supports a child."

Ramey lives his philosophy in two ways, Davis said. First, he is a very hands-on superintendent who is interested and actively involved in knowing what is happening for kids in the district. In addition, he cultivates relationships with administrators, attends school activities, meets with every new teacher and cares about who is driving the buses and cooking the school meals each day, she said.

Secondly, his decisions are guided by the questions "how is this best for kids" or "what is best for kids," Davis said.

One way that Ramey has created a culture of doing what's best for kids is by personally meeting with each and every newly hired teacher and introducing them to the school's mission and vision.

People might be surprised to know that Ramey has a photographic memory and never forgets the information he reads in a document or the name of a staff member, according to Bambi Lawlis, his executive assistant.

"He wants to know every employee," she said.

Teachers are overheard saying that when they have to make a decision, they think "What would Mr. Ramey say? He would say 'Do what's best for kids,'" Lawlis said.

All employees are important because they all have a tremendous opportunity to make an impact on a child's life, from the bus drivers who greet students as they get on the bus in the morning to the cafeteria workers who serve them their meals, Ramey said.

"My skill set is that I love people but especially kids," Ramey said. "Young children deserve a committed adult. If you are going to get into education and you are going to go into teaching you are also going to go into a commitment to make a difference for kids. It's not about the money and it's not about the job, it's about how you can serve kids and families and how can you be an impactful, positive influence in their life."

Retirement

Ramey may be retiring, but he will always be a Panther, he said.

The decision to retire has been difficult because after 52 years he still has plenty of energy and passion for supporting public education. However, he also wants to spend some time with his children and grandchildren as well as travel.

"The hardest thing for me is leaving the school district," Ramey said. "I'm finally graduating after 52 years. The bottom line is I have absolutely loved it and I'm not sure how I'm going to fill that void yet. I do love watching teachers teach and watching kids grow and develop."

He plans to stay involved with his church and attend plenty of athletic events to cheer on the Panthers.

"It's been a wonderful experience," he said. "I'm blessed to serve Siloam. It's been a labor of love and I've been blessed with the trust of families' most important thing in their life, which is their children. To share that is a beautiful calling and I've immensely appreciated parent's trusting our leadership with their children."