

## Fairfield rising to the occasion

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They were without their chief executive officer for six weeks earlier this year, but the members of the **Fairfield** Board of Education – and the administrators in the central office – rose to the occasion to keep their district running smoothly.

Fairfield Superintendent **Dr. David Title** was out of work for six weeks this spring after donating a kidney to his 26-year-old son, Russell, who was born with a variation of a genetic condition known as Alport syndrome; its effects include a slow deterioration of the kidney function over the course of one's lifetime. Earlier this year, doctors determined Russell would need a new kidney and his father turned out to be a perfect match.

"From the point of view of running the school system, I was out of work for six weeks beginning April 29, which is obviously a very busy time of year," Title told *The CABE Journal* last month. "But we didn't have any choice about that."

Title developed a plan with his central office staff members, who collaborated to fill the void left by his absence. "He prepared his staff to maintain business as usual and continue to work on the goals that we have all agreed to and to work with the board to accomplish those goals," explained Fairfield Board of Education Chairman **Philip Dwyer**. "And, in June, when we met with Dr. Title as we do every year, to say, 'how did the year go?' There wasn't a single goal that was not worked

on, advanced or accomplished despite his being out of commission for nearly a couple of months."

Dwyer stressed that Title refused to let any of the district's goals stall or be neglected because of his absence. "It is always a challenge to lead a district when your chief executive officer is out, but at the same time, Dr. Title refused to accept that the district's goals would not still be focused on and accomplished and so he worked very hard to make sure that happened," said Dwyer.

Title's capable staff – led by his Deputy Superintendent **Karen Parks** – kept the day to day operations of the district humming along.

"We put a whole plan together, and most of the work fell to my deputy superintendent Karen Parks and she is somebody with whom I have worked professionally for 25 years," said Title. "I have a lot of faith in Karen; we have worked together in three districts. She knows how I would approach things and she probably can finish my sentences for me."

The rest of the central office team divvied the remaining tasks that needed to be covered with Parks stepping in as de facto superintendent. "It's a big district here so I have got a nice central office team; they all divvied up the responsibilities and some of Karen's work as well," he said. "I am blessed to have great people here who can step in."

Title's administrative assistant Meg Brown, whom he called a "godsend,"

checked his emails – he gets around 100 a day – and made sure that he didn't have to check his work email once during the six weeks he was out, enabling him to focus fully on his recovery.

"I was kind of sitting at home and I was starting to get some function and I was getting kind of antsy," said Title. "So I kind of dropped some hints that if you do need me to help, or you do need me to weigh in on something, I am home and you can call me."

"And I think the staff just decided maybe for my own good, but also for their own good, that they were not going to involve me at all," continued Title. "And so really for six weeks, I had absolutely no – almost no – contact with anything work related at all so I could completely focus on just getting myself recovered."

Title estimated he missed about five Board meetings during his absence, but Parks was a more than capable fill in, according to Dwyer. "His Deputy Superintendent Karen Parks rose to the occasion and sat in for the superintendent at our board table for the meetings," said Dwyer.

Dwyer added that Title has a leadership style that is based on teamwork and so it's not uncommon for him to, when asked a question at a board meeting, to ask his staff members present to directly answer those types of questions.

"And so Karen had the same ability to draw on staff and respond to questions that the person who has all the detailed information might be better off answering," said Dwyer. "And one of our board members, in talking about [Title being out] in June said, to [Title's] credit, 'we didn't miss a beat' is the phrase they used."

While Title's staff "did very well in his absence," according to Dwyer, "His staff would probably say, 'we missed him; yes, we rose to the occasion, but we missed him and are glad he is back.'"

Title, for his part, appreciated the support he received from his board. "The board was very supportive, particularly Phil Dwyer, but all of them," said Title. "They knew what was happening and they understood they would not have this access to me but that they could access other people."

It has been a difficult few years for Title and his family. In April 2014, his 20-year-old son Jack, who also had Alport syndrome, passed away. "Basically, Jack's kidney function, rather than deteriorating slowly, deteriorated very rapidly and it led to a sequence of events that ultimately ended up in his dying," recalled Title.

"Right after that, we decided that we didn't want to wait around for the same

thing to happen to Russell and so we started having him tested more frequently for his kidney function," said Title.

At the beginning of 2015, doctors told Title's family it was time to start looking around for a donor for Russell. "His kidney function was not at that point where he would need a donor, but he was going to need a donor sometime in the next say, 12-18 months, and so we then started to try and look for donors," said Title.

Within a month, it was determined that Title was "a perfect match" for his son "and that nobody else who was in the pipeline was even close," he said. At that point, the family resolved to keep looking for another donor – the hope was that a younger donor would be found – but Russell's condition quickly declined.

"His kidneys started to decline fairly rapidly – much more rapidly than they had anticipated," said Title.

"And he started losing weight; he had some other medical conditions that were worsening as a result, and it was getting to the point where he would have to go on dialysis soon. And we had been through that

with my other son and it didn't end well because dialysis has its problems as well."

This spring, for the sake of his son, Title had no choice but to undergo surgery and donate a kidney. "It got to the point where [doctors] said, 'look, we know this is a terrible time of year for you at work and you had said this would be much better done in the summer or fall but your son can't wait,'" recalled Title.

"And so it was really a no-brainer and I said, 'schedule it, I will be there; people at work completely understand this; my board completely understands this; we will make it work at the office, this is the least of the problems, knowing what had happened to my other son,'" explained Title.

After surgery, Title missed six weeks and then returned to work part-time until July 1, when he began working full time again.


Though Title is still recovering, both he and his son are doing well. "My son is doing great; he is like a new person and has so much energy," he said. "A number of the medical issues that were caused by the kidney failure have cleared up."

Had he not donated his kidney to his son, Title said Russell would have been on a donor waiting list for three to four years, "during which time he would be on dialysis, which we don't know he could have survived."


While many people have praised Title for his selflessness in donating his kidney to his son, he says he was just doing what any parent would. "Parents make sacrifices for their kids all the time and this is something I think any parent would have done," said Title. "I did not even think twice about it."



**Dr. David Title and his son Russell**



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