

Joe Gothard, Becky Kundert and Sonia Spencer Remarks

Madison Rotary Club 29 July 2026 [Machine generated transcript]

[00:00:00] To us today will be Dr. Joe Gothard. He's a native Mass-- Madisonian and returned to our city in twenty twenty-four to take the role of Superintendent of MPS after serving as Superintendent of Saint Paul Public Schools for several years. Also speaking will be Becky Kundert, who is the Senior Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction at the Madison Metropolitan School District.

She provides visionary, collaborative, and strategic leadership- We should be seen ... [00:00:30] uh, for all aspects of curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation across the district's K through twelve cur-- continuum, with a dedicated focu-focus on literacy achievement. In addition, Sonya Spencer will join Dr.

Gothard and Becky at the podium. Becky is the Senior Strategic Partnerships Coordinator for the Madison Metropolitan School District, where she leads the development of-- development and stewardship of str-strategic partnerships [00:01:00] that expand opportunities for students and families in schools. We look forward to their presentation, and we made a contribution to the Rotary International Polio Plus Fund as a way to say thanks for speaking with us today.

I also wanted to mention that we have Q&A with our speaker as time follows-- as time allows, but please wait for the microphone if you have a question. Join me in welcoming Jo- Dr. Gothard, Becky, and Sonya.[00:01:30]

Rotarians, friends, colleagues, partners, so many committed people[00:02:00]

I'm gonna just speak briefly to get set up for my subject matter experts. My great friends and colleagues, Becky and, and Sonia are gonna take it from there, and just illustrate the importance of, of doing this work. Um, it can't be done alone. When we think about literacy in this city, it certainly is not superintendent alone, and it's not the school board alone, and it's not, uh, policies that we have written alone.

Um, it really does require an entire community. [00:02:30] And there are three things that I'd like to share with you this morning First is what we're reacting to in many ways Act 20, which for the first time that I can think of is a comprehensive way that the state is directing us to ensure that children are gaining literacy skills to be literate in our school systems, to be at or above grade level every step of the way, uh, for us to do that work.

And when we think of why that law is important and how we're [00:03:00] going to do that work, it really is a call to action, uh, for all of us. It certainly got our attention, my attention, the board's attention. But I think sometimes we lose, uh, perspective on why it's important. And here's why it's important. In MMSD, I'm very proud to say that we've seen some really nice progress.

At Lakeview Elementary School, I can tell you that their students gained proficiency, uh, increased by ten percentage points this year. I can tell you that overall middle school [00:03:30] in the district improved by two point eight percentage points. But understand, everyone, that's from forty-six point seven percent to forty-nine point five percent.

And again, we're talking about our state standardized proficiency tests, the forward examination, uh, when sharing that data. Overall, Black students in MMSD middle schools increased their scores by two point eight percent or two point eight, uh, points, and Hispanic Latino students by two points. At Blackhawk Middle School, proficiency grew [00:04:00] by eleven percentage points, with Hispanic Latino students growing by twelve points and Black students increasing by eight points.

Memorial High School saw an increase in seven percent in reading. But again, overall, our district improved by two point six percent, thirty-eight point four percent to forty-one percent. And so again, while it would be great to expect a round of applause for improving, you can see the work we have yet remained to do.[00:04:30]

Um, it's going to require everything, every resource, everyone's effort, students feeling encouraged, valued, coming to school every day. Um, Principal Gibson talked about making sure that we have meals, making sure our students are fed and nourished. I mean, it does require an entire community approach for the whole student.

Students are far more complex than their reading. There's a lot of other things that we have to fuel them and give them as well. [00:05:00] Uh, but here today, we're going to talk about our efforts, uh, to truly increase the work that we're doing and how we wish to and are expecting to partner with the community and what we might need from you and, and your support in this room and in the, the spaces that you lead or, or serve, um, or are a committed member of this community.

So I just wanted to, to thank you and, and, and really say how proud I am to turn it over to, to Sony and Becky Been a longtime colleague of Becky's from my Madison one point O, uh, stint. Um, [00:05:30] Sonia getting to know as, as I'm coming back. I certainly know her family and connections to her family. But

I learned very quickly that there are very bl- few places that I go in the community that Sonia's not an hour behind me.

Um, so it's been really great to partner with her and, and to just know, um, how much her perspectives are valued and, and trusted by this community. She means a lot to me personally, um, but a lot to MSD as well. So I'm gonna turn it over to, to the two of them. I know our time is limited, so we're gonna get [00:06:00] through-- they're going to get through as much as possible so we can encourage some dialogue as well.

Thank you, everyone.[00:06:30]

introduction. I just wanted to let you know Becky does not play two roles. Um, I'm the one that is in the role of senior strategic partnerships. So I just wanted to put that out there. Um, thank you everyone, and thank you Dr. Gothard for that introduction. Um, my name is Tonya Spencer. I serve as the district's, uh, senior strategic partnership coordinator.

I have been in this role for two and a half years, and really, really [00:07:00] proud to, um, elevate the work that we're doing in MMSD when it comes to strategic partnerships, because we all know we cannot do this work alone. And I'll hand Becky to this herself.

As she puts it back in, I take it back out 'cause I am a teacher at heart, first and foremost a teacher, so I'm used to talking with my hands as well. Somebody was talking about that today. Uh, thank you for being here today. I'm Becky Kundert. I'm the senior executive director of curriculum and [00:07:30] instruction K-twelve, so all things literacy, math, science, social studies, arts, uh, world language, uh, health, PE, you name it.

If we have curriculum and our students are learning about it in school, the-- all of that work comes from our department. So I'm really glad to be here today with you all. As you know, our schools are in summer session right now, which is also a big, uh, focus for us. And then we will swing into the school year, which is planning right now as well.

So [00:08:00] we will get started. And actually, to get started, because again, teacher first, I, um, need you to take a moment and think about your first memories of reading Think about when that was, maybe where you were, who you were with

And maybe if you can remember how you began to read. And then I'm gonna have you at your table, we're just gonna [00:08:30] take two minutes, so if you wanna just grab an elbow partner or have a whole table discussion, two

minutes to get grounded 'cause that's what we're gonna talk about today is your literacy or bi-literacy journey.

So please take two minutes and turn and go. Often when we are in our classrooms, you will hear people that wanna bring us back to our elementary days 'cause we're talking about your first memories of reading. So a way that we can come together would be when I say, "Mac and cheese," you say, "Everybody freeze."

So mac and cheese. [00:09:00] Everybody freeze. So might be one, one way that we pull together as a classroom that they're usually taught before we break into conversation. Um, one of the things I hear through middle school this last year was, uh, they would say, "Waterfall," and then everybody would go, "Shhh." So some people already know some of these things, right?

My favorite was when I was the principal at Orchard Ridge, and I would say, "Listen, listen, listen," and we'd be in the gym with four hundred kids, and they would all go, "Up, up, up," right? So [00:09:30] you're thinking about what that routine is for us. I digressed a little bit. As you were thinking about your first reading experiences, how many of you...

Right? Don't show hands, but how many of you had experiences where you might have been learning on a Reader's Digest, like myself with my grandma? Um, how many of you also might have been, when you're thinking about that reading process, and when you get to a space when you got stuck, you might have been in a place where people directed you to [00:10:00] guess what the word is?

Sound it out. Maybe use the picture- Oh. That will help you. Those are ways that which was ve- actually very common across all of the country in how we thought we would be teaching reading. So it's very common for people's experiences to, I come to an unfamiliar word, I'm going to guess. Maybe I'll even look at the first letter and then try to guess and/or I will use a [00:10:30] picture.

And that has been historically where we had taught reading for many decades, and that is where Madison was in teaching reading for many decades. And what we know is that in order to change a system from a practice of that into the shift to the science of reading, which is knowing that the, what the research shows about our brain, does not happen overnight We know that a variety of you or maybe [00:11:00] your children were taught in that way.

And so also what happens is then when our students go home, they're re-directed to do those exact same prompts, right? How many of you have heard the comment, um, or have said the comment yourself like, "I didn't do

math that way." Right? "That is not right. That's not the right math." I can remember sitting myself, engaging with my dad, my dad being like, "That's wrong.

We're gonna do it my way, and then you're gonna explain how you did it." Right? And so I think [00:11:30] about, right, generations of our children that were really taught with, at that moment, what was thought was best practice about learning to read, and that it will just come to you, and that it will naturally happen.

But as you know, Dr. Gothard just shared our data, that is not true. We should not be sitting in a place where we can say sixty percent of our students are not proficient at their grade level in reading. So what we do know is that science [00:12:00] has definitely shifted in the past, actually over twenty years. But Madison has just engaged since really COVID, where we at COVID during that time, we really spent a deep, a, um, significant amount of time at a school.

I was at-- principal at Orchard Ridge at the time, where we were engaging with our staff about, "This is not working. We are working really hard, but we're spinning our wheels, and our student data is not changing, and they are not growing." And we were all [00:12:30] uncomfortable with that. And we knew that that same conversation was happening in our community, with the colleges in our community and across our community organizations.

And thus, really the journey to the science of reading began, which is where we know brain research has shown us how actually reading happens in the brain. And through eye gaze studies, yes, eye gaze studies, we discovered that actually people that are proficient readers [00:13:00] see every letter. They are processing that really quickly.

So when you get to a space in your reading, you go back to those letters and you practice sounding them out. And then you're also checking for meaning. The brain is an amazing thing. So on here you can see I just wanted to share some common things that you might see, um, around the science of reading if you're ever pulling up a fun research study.

You will see what is the simple view of reading, which is the three boxes at the [00:13:30] bottom. Which is that word recognition multiplied by our language comprehension is how we engage in reading comprehension. So it's very complex. You will also see Scarborough's Rope, which is off on the right-hand side, which has all of those different pieces broken down.

Innocen- essentially, I'm showing you this because what I want you to know is that actually reading is a very complex thing. It doesn't just occur naturally and therefore, this shift for us in [00:14:00] Madison isn't something that just

happens overnight, and we blink. So coming back from COVID, Madison began really thinking about and engaging in literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading.

Which means then we're thinking about what does that professional development look like for our teachers and all of our teachers that have been teaching with the cueing that I explained to you earlier, guess the word, use the picture, had to shift their practices. And while we were shifting their practices [00:14:30] and engaging in that professional learning, we were also adopting high-quality curriculum.

Right? So you think about when teachers are going to school, all of those pieces needed to come together because we could not just say, "Hey, shift and switch how you're teaching," and not give you materials to support it. Also during that time, we really wanted to make sure that we were at, uh, leveraging our assessments in a better way.

We had already had screeners that we were using across our [00:15:00] schools, but we really needed to get into a position of thinking about, about more strategically our diagnostic assessments and how are we communicating this with our families. And to be honest, nobody wants to have a meeting with a family that says, "Your child can't read."

That your child is grade levels below. And those were conversations that I think honestly were probably being, many times being said [00:15:30] with lots of love and kindness because what tells you you don't belong more than that. But then also thinking about what is that, what was that going to look like for us?

Because I think many conversations weren't being had. So what that has done is we were in this process in an engagement, and I'm not going to spend a ton of time on this slide, but what you should know is that Act 20, which is also known as Wisconsin Reads, had eight essential components to the law and the legislation of which [00:16:00] Madison actually was already well on its journey in implementing.

So we were really reaffirmed in this process of when the legislation passed, knowing we just had a couple small tweaks to adjust and timelines to consider. We were well on our journey. That takes us to this year today, where we have been engaging in some summer intensive literacy and what that has been for us in Madison this year, because we know that we are not meeting all of our students where they are [00:16:30] at, and we're trying to be responsive to families' needs.

We have our summer semester classes for all of our students that really need an additional boost in literacy over the summer and bi-literacy, as well as we

offered this year four programs in our actual community centers because we know lots of our families send their students to the community centers.

We need to be where our kids are and where the need is. So four of our sites this summer we piloted are really engaging in some deep literacy work [00:17:00] and tutoring specifically, as well as our summer school, um, intensive. We have that at one site where we have an interventionist who comes in for families that are just able to drop their kids off for an hour a day.

Because we also know some families are like, "No, I do not want my child in summer school all day. I'm not going to send them to a camp. This is their time to do other things." So we're trying to really think about the responsiveness for that. And then of course, where we always encourage all of our families is really important is go to our libraries, [00:17:30] go to our libraries and go to the community.

Because what we do say is that it takes a city to raise a-

All right. Thank you so much, Becky. Um, also just kinda wanted to piggyback off of Becky when she mentioned the community center sites. Those sites are East Madison Community Center, Bayview Community Center, Teresa Terrace, uh, Northport, and [00:18:00] Packers Community Centers. Those are the current four sites that are now-- Well, this is the last week initiating the summer learning sites.

One of the great things that brings me a lot of joy, and I think a lot of you have heard me talk about this, is Freedom Schools. Freedom Schools is one of our newest partners. This is actually our second year of implementation. And Freedom Schools is one of the most exciting literacy partnerships that we currently have.

Freedom Schools takes [00:18:30] a different approach to literacy. Our students don't just learn to read. They discover the joy of reading while also developing their own confidence, leadership skills, and a strong sense of identity. Each student receives a book that reflects cultures, experiences, and communities, helping them see themselves in literature.

And one of the great things about the program, it also touches on emotional, um, social and emotional development and [00:19:00] also leadership.

I think you all have heard about Mad for Reading. Mad for Reading is our district's literacy campaign that focuses on engaging reading and accessibility and of course, making it joyful. One of the things about the campaign is that it reminds us that creating readers truly is a community effort. The work that we

do [00:19:30] or the campaign that we do around M-uh, Mad for Reading really also serves as a platform for you all and other organizations across our city to contribute in a meaningful way.

There is a QR code there. We really encourage you to take the pledge, and from there, you'll be able to see the impact that you can also make through Mad for Reading. We also just wanted to share brief examples of some of the efforts that we [00:20:00] have laid on the ground to support us with literacy. Madison Reading Project is a great example of that.

Together with them, we are ensuring that all of our scholars have books, not only in school, but also books for them to take home and to build their own library. In addition, Madison Reading Project also partners with our teachers in supporting them build their own libraries. [00:20:30] And I have to say, my son's a fifth-grade educator.

He has his own library from Madison Reading Project

Also wanted to share a little bit about, um, really the, the, the high level of, um, literacy and key efforts that we, we currently have. United Way has been, um, an important collaborator in strengthening our connections that [00:21:00] support literacy. Our expanded partnership with the Morger Center increases access to trained college students who will reflect who our students also are and are working directly with our elementary school.

At the same time, our long-standing partnership with the Urban League continues to provide high-quality tutoring and mentoring that [00:21:30] supports students throughout their educational journey and even beyond to college

So all in all, we need you. We really do. We can't do this work alone, and we know that. We need the support from our community, we need support from our families, and also our staff. Without this, we can't do it alone. If there are opportunities for you [00:22:00] to volunteer, um, for you to connect with me and figure out how we can partner to make something happen, then we are ready and willing to listen to what is available or what you guys can offer.

So we do need you to spread the word[00:22:30]

Ready for questions Okay. All right

My name is Cheryl Kato, and I just want to applaud, uh, the Madison School District because, uh, from another lens, uh, where social emotional

development is incorporated into this plan, [00:23:00] um, I worked with a seven-year-old who could not read. Oh, sure. And I

thought maybe a learning disability. I am a trauma therapist. Um, but after her, um, time in trauma, uh, recovery, she ended up in talented and gifted classes. And so I just want to applaud the integration of a whole child, uh, in looking at this and being so inclusive in working, [00:23:30] uh, on this critical, uh, critical, critical, um, issue

Thank you so much for everything you do and for being here today. I'm wondering if you could tell us how the results, uh, from the early literacy curriculum in twenty twenty-two have played out and what that tells us about the district's, you know, commitment to the science of reading, which you both-- uh, all of you mentioned.

Thank you. [00:24:00] So our adoption of two resources, because we have literacy and biliteracy components, so just as a reminder for Spanish as well as Spanish and English, which Jackie was also alluding to earlier. Um, our results have been, we have gone up by about one percent. Here is where we are really, um, problem-solving around, right?

We're recognizing the shift for teachers is really significant at the elementary level, and like that training is really critical. And beyond the training is the follow-up [00:24:30] pieces. Um, as well as that curriculum adoption in an elementary school at K-one-two actually is two hours a day to think about the implementation timeline.

So we're talking about modules and students understanding using a knowledge-based curriculum, as well as the word recognition pieces. That timeline fades a little bit as kids get older. Um, and so we are really trying to double down on the independent work being aligned with [00:25:00] what they're learning in their small group, right?

So we know that the grade level work is really important, and that independent work has to align. We've been in a place where other resources did not, right? They would complete their learning, and then they would write rainbow words that weren't connected. And so getting, um, changing people's routines, um, is, is a work in progress.

Do you test, um, everybody very early, kindergarten, first grade, diagnostic tests for things such as processing issues, not [00:25:30] obvious things necessarily like dyslexia? Or do you wait until a problem is discovered? I used to live in the Washington DC area. One county did it prophylactically and saved a small fortune in remedial education.

Yeah, we start assessing in four K. Um, so four K, we have, uh, the assessment, the screener that we give twice a year, the beginning of the year in October, actually, for four K because we need kids to kinda come in and get settled before we say sit down and test. Um, but starting then in kindergarten, we start in September.

[00:26:00] So everybody is screened in Madison. Um, kindergarten through, uh, high school, we're screened three times a year. So, uh, we do that for literacy. And at that point then, we utilize that data to tell us further what's our diagnostic that we need to engage in, and then we follow up with the diagnostic to really hone in on what skills the student is lagging at this time to address that.

I could just add one thing, just so everyone knows. Four K is not compulsory in the state of Wisconsin, so we're talking about thirteen hundred students. Um, so we [00:26:30] still are-- there still are children that may not be getting that type of service at that entry point.

So, so thank you for doing this very, very, very important work. What are the obstacles, the, the, the leading obstacles that you face in doing your work? And do those obstacles vary by grade level?

I would say the obstacles vary by grade level, vary by school and community, of course. But I would say the one that we are really [00:27:00] working hard to address is ensuring that we're spending the time with our leading assets, right? In our spaces, which is our teachers and all of our staff that are engaging with our students.

So like really intensive professional development, more embedded professional development. So like what is that follow-up piece? I can go to a training or a workshop, but I actually need the embedded follow-up and the coaching that follows with that. So I would say that those structures and systems are what we're refining.

If I can just have two seconds. I just wanna [00:27:30] remind Rotarians that we have adopted the Henderson, uh, Elementary School, and, um, we have, uh, we're current- I'm currently a tutor of first and second grade kids in reading, and it's a delight, and it's the best thing that happens to me all week, and I would really encourage everybody to please sign up to tutor.

Thank you.

Thank you for speaking with us today. Thanks to [00:28:00] everyone who attended today's meeting