



Board of Education Column

By Melissa Burkland, Fargo Board of Education President

The Dignity Index

Each April, the Fargo Board of Education has the opportunity to participate in transformative, high-quality, and educational sessions at the National School Board Association's annual conference. This is an opportunity for training, networking, and learning about cutting-edge technologies and ideas to better serve our students and districts. This year's conference in New Orleans was just that and the attending board members and I had amazing sessions and learning experiences. Although all were valuable, one keynote speaker and concept stood out among the rest: Dr. Timothy Shiver's presentation on "The Dignity Index" was invaluable to every facet of our work as school board members.

[The Dignity Index](#) asks us, "If you could help ease divisions in America, would you do it?" and instructs that "our disagreements aren't causing the divisions in our country; it's what we do when we disagree." The Dignity Index uses a scale of 1-8 to examine how much contempt or dignity we are using when we communicate. Low scores (1-4) are using divisive language and high scores (5-8) demonstrate language rooted in dignity. In practice, a low score would use language like "it's us or them" or "better than" language that divides us from others. High scores are grounded in listening, understanding, finding common ground, engaging with others, and recognizing that all human beings are born with inherent worth. At its core, the Dignity Index is intended to prevent harm, mitigate divisions, and solve problems.

What does this mean for our work on the Board? Well, when we ground ourselves with dignity, we can become masters of all the work before us. As the Negotiations Committee negotiates the teacher's contract with the FEA, we can strive to listen and problem solve. When our Governmental Affairs Committee is advocating for our District in the North Dakota Legislature, we can find common ground, engage with others, and be ready to have deep discussions and see what breakthroughs we may encounter. Our Planning Committee can use the Dignity Index to discuss competing values and interests as we tackle finances and long-range planning. The Communications, Engagement, and Advocacy Committee can be open to receiving feedback, admitting mistakes, and recognizing that everyone has a right to be heard. As we embark on an ambitious Long-Range Facility Plan, we can welcome the duty to work with others and search for the values and interests of community members.

When we can develop respectful relationships with all Fargo Public Schools stakeholders and treat everyone with dignity – even while disagreeing – we are well poised to educate and empower all students to succeed.

