

Interview of Pat Sandro

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SPEAKERS

Pat Sandro, Don Cooper

D Don Cooper 00:07

All right, Pat Sandro, the first director of the charter schools office at Grand Valley. It's an honor to be with you today.

P Pat Sandro 00:12

Thank you.

D Don Cooper 00:13

Great. Thanks. And just could you could you share a little bit about yourself? How did you get introduced to charter schools? How did you get introduced to Grand Valley?

P Pat Sandro 00:23

Well, I was the superintendent of the Grand Rapids Public Schools. We had 34,000 students, 2000 teachers, 210 million budget. But after I solved the problems with staff, I, I retired after four years, and I started investing in real estate. But I got a call from Don Lubbers and he asked me to play golf with him. He said he wanted to talk to me. And I went out and after nine holes, we hadn't had a question from him. And I said, "Don, what, what do you want? What do you need?" And he said, "I want you to come to Grand Valley and direct our charter schools program." He said, "I'm a friend of the governor and it's been two years we've been trying to get a charter, but we don't have any." I said, "Well, I'll consider it." And he said, "No, I want you to do it." I said, "Well Don, I don't think I can." He said, "Why not?" And I said, "Well, because I'll lose my friends." And he couldn't believe it. And he said, immediately, "Pat, if you lose a friend, helping a child get an education, which you're in, you don't have friends." I said, "Whoa," I said, "I hadn't given that one a thought, I'll call you tomorrow." So I went to two friends that I could

trust for truth and you don't always get the truth when you're a superintendent. And they both discouraged me, one of them violently. And I said, "Well, thanks, Dan." I said, "I needed that advice." And I called Don back, I said, "Where do you want me in the morning?" And he said, "You come out." He said, "I'll give you an office."

D Don Cooper 02:21

So what was what about that conversation changed your mind to get you into the charter space?

P Pat Sandro 02:26

Well, I had read this legislation, and I had most of my problems in Grand Rapids were with the nine unions that I had. And I'd spend a whole day with them. And I'd go home with a headache. And they were really dictating things for teachers.

D Don Cooper 02:43

Sure.

P Pat Sandro 02:44

And I just thought about it. And I thought about the potential freedom that a charter would have. You could name your own board members. You could give the school part of the state aid, which you got. We did that. And Grand Valley's board was really interested in this. And I thought, you know, this is a chance to do something really unique. And it turned out to be exactly true.

D Don Cooper 03:15

So when you came to Grand Valley, before any of the schools were opened, what were some of your thoughts during that first year helping get the schools launched?

P Pat Sandro 03:24

Well, in the first year, I wasn't liked by the faculty, cuz they were all from the traditional union schools. They wouldn't talk to me. But I was meeting people, when I looked at their applications that were really innovative. I got to know them. And I picked the six best. And I took that to the board and asked for their approval. And the next day, the headline in the Grand Rapids Press was 'Grand Valley Charters Six Schools', which was a shot heard around the state. All of a sudden, I'm on everybody's speaker bureau. And I'm telling them the truth. Because that's all I can do is work with the truth.

D Don Cooper 04:12

And who else was involved in chartering at the time, who were some of the others?

P Pat Sandro 04:16

Central was bigger, they had already started, Oakland University near Detroit and then Ferris was interested and they hadn't hired anyone. But we really caught up quickly. I'd go to the board every month with a charter school.

D Don Cooper 04:38

What were some of the more memorable schools that you chartered?

P Pat Sandro 04:41

Well, the first one was a national heritage school.

D Don Cooper 04:45

Okay.

P Pat Sandro 04:47

And that was a profit making corporation which was a no no, because they would abuse the money according to the talk. And they creamed the school, they take all the best students, that turned out to be wrong. The word was that you won't have any minority kids. That was totally wrong. They won't serve special ed. Those are the kinds of people we were serving. And the people that were applying weren't the best. They hadn't had a good experience in education. So it was very interesting.

D Don Cooper 05:32

What were some of the, you know, after that first national heritage school that was chartered, going back to the board every month, how did your board at Grand Valley react to chartering?

P Pat Sandro 05:43

Well, they really questioned the fact that we would hire a profit making corporation to charter schools. And one of the charges against charters was they're going to take our money, and they shouldn't have our money. But I would say these are public school children. It's their money. And that was an eye opener for me that would be true.

D Don Cooper 06:15

What were some of the so that thank you for sharing the challenges with with the University Board. What were some of the community challenges? When when a new school would open a new community? What were some of the reactions that you would hear comments that people would make about Grand Valley?

P Pat Sandro 06:24

Well, first of all, Don Lubbers asked me if we were going to plan this charter school to talk to the principal, or the superintendent in the school, that where we were going to charter it. And I'd do that, I'd buy lunch and talk about it and the first superintendent we talked with had a heart attack.

D Don Cooper 06:53

Okay.

P Pat Sandro 06:54

And he had it when we were having lunch. And that was a very difficult situation. People were angry about that. We chartered and the school, became a very large school early.

D Don Cooper 07:10

Which school was at that?

P Pat Sandro 07:11

That was in Muskegon.

D Don Cooper 07:12

Okay. And then your interactions with President Lubbers. It sounds like he was really supportive of chartering at the university level.

P Pat Sandro 07:24

He was the most supportive, he is an entrepreneurial person. If there's a chance to make an improvement in schools, he wants it. And he'd pat me on the back. And he say, "Go get em!"

D Don Cooper 07:41

What were some of your more memorable experiences in working with President Lubbers?

P Pat Sandro 07:44

Well, he was just totally behind charters. Because he really went to the schools, he'd go with me to a board meeting. And his board was so positive, because they were from communities that had charters. And as Grand Rapids superintendent, I never had anyone call me and thank me for the education we're providing. But with charters, I have people that would say, "God bless Grand Valley. You saved my son, he can't wait to get to school." And that opens your eyes.

D Don Cooper 08:26

What were some of the more memorable phone calls on that? Did any stand out in particular?

P Pat Sandro 08:31

I had a few people call me and they said, "If I don't quit chartering, they're gonna, they're gonna take me out." Being Italian, I kind of welcomed that.

D Don Cooper 08:43

Was there ever any doubt, getting calls like that, or pushback in community? Did you ever get discouraged that you were on the wrong path?

P Pat Sandro 08:52

No, in fact, I got encouraged by all the mothers who would cry and say, "You saved my son. He gets up early, he makes his own breakfast, he gets dressed, and he said, I used to have to throw water on him to get him out of bed." I just never had that experience. I was always dealing with union problems, raising money, selling millage. I wasn't even talking about education. I had an assistant superintendent doing that. Here I was going to board members at charters, they're very entrepreneurial people. And it was fun.

D Don Cooper 09:30

So some of the board members that that you would have worked with to a point are still serving on some of the boards.

P Pat Sandro 09:36

They are!

D Don Cooper 09:37
Andy De Vries.

P Pat Sandro 09:39
Andy De Vries, he was the first one at Grand Valley with the National Heritage school.

D Don Cooper 09:45
Yeah, so they're still making a lasting impact. What was it like working with some of those first board members?

P Pat Sandro 09:50
Well, I they were all learning too. They were learning as I was, and I don't know that they were as convinced of the promise of it, but they were great people, to a person. Most of them stayed quite a while. And J.C. would come to me because we're chartering more of his schools than any others. And he'd say, "I need a principal", and I had one who had a bad experience in Grand Rapids, it was a great person. I'd say you oughta call Bill Knoester. Great principle. All those people, there were 16 of them that transferred from Grand Rapids, to the charters, and they all stayed longer than I did, seven years. Because I told Don, I do this for a year. But it was, it was just a wonderful experience.

D Don Cooper 10:49
So seven years at Grand Valley.

P Pat Sandro 10:51
Yes.

D Don Cooper 10:52
You had shared with me earlier that you were the only person working in the charter schools office for the first two.

P Pat Sandro 10:58
First two years, I didn't have a secretary.

first two years, I didn't have a secretary.

D

Don Cooper 11:00

So what was it like growing out the office over time?

P

Pat Sandro 11:04

Well, I chose people that were, as I was wondering if it would work. But all I had to do was to give em a school or two or three or four. Sure. Because I couldn't go to all the board meetings at night. And they were convinced they were very, very energetic about them. And you know, I never had anyone call me and ask, what's the secret of these schools? How come there's waiting lists at all of them? And I'd explain it.

D

Don Cooper 11:43

So over seven years, as your staff grew the the number of schools that the university chartered grew too.

P

Pat Sandro 11:49

There were 35 when I left. All over the state. And we decided that if if we wanted to know what was going on the school, we had to be there at the board meeting. So I suggested that we go to board meetings, but I was going to them and J.C or umm Don Lubber's said, "You need some help." I said, "I do." So we hired former superintendents, because they knew the curriculum. They knew the school code. And they knew how to solve problems. So it really worked out well.

D

Don Cooper 12:24

So in that seven years, what are some of the lessons that as you were helping develop the authorizer space, what were some of the lessons that you learned from that, that other authorizers might take away today?

P

Pat Sandro 12:38

Well, you're the compliance officer, but you're after the state school code, I think there's 600 pages there. And so charters, that charge was they won't be compliant, when the fact was they had two compliance, they had the State Department of Education, and the university. So I had a chance to go out and help them make policy, hire board members and all that. But I didn't have to do it, that was a major difference.

D

Don Cooper 13:17

So during during the time, as you were growing the charter schools office, in the university

so during during the time, as you were growing the charter schools office, in the university's portfolio, there was a pretty big lawsuit in the late 1990s challenging the constitutionality of charters. Tell me some of your reflections on that.

P Pat Sandro 13:33

Well, I had the lawyer, Don Butcher at Grand Valley, I talked to him almost every day. And I got a lot of law help. And I, I would talk to those lawyers in Lansing, who were working with the state school board, so I had a good feeling for the law. By the way, when I had the Grand Rapids schools, when I walked into the office, I had 105 lawsuits through the unions against teachers. So I was in court a lot. Never with charters.

D Don Cooper 14:14

Okay. So it didn't shake you at all. The lawsuit didn't dissuade you from continuing or dissuade the university.

P Pat Sandro 14:24

No. You know, in America, if you have a problem with a group or an association, you've always got the courts. that's healthy.

D Don Cooper 14:36

So after that was resolved and charters were more stable, legally, who were some of the groups or other organizations that you may have worked with? I know MAPSA was emerging at the time and some of the other charter support...

P Pat Sandro 14:52

I was working with the other charter school directors. We would meet in Lansing, once a month. Talk about the problems and the challenges, but I was also meeting every three weeks with charter school directors that we had. And there were 35 of them in the room. And I wouldn't even have to speak, and they, they'd help one another with the solution to problems?

D Don Cooper 15:16

Did they all come to Grand Rapids? Or did you go to them?

P Pat Sandro 15:19

The came to Grand Valley, where we'd meet at the golf course restaurant there, buy em lunch. And they'd exchange ideas, and they'd all get stronger.

D Don Cooper 15:30

That's great. That is, we're still we still have a lot of those practices going on today.

D Don Cooper 15:37

Yesterday was our principals meeting in Lansing, so of the 80 schools that the university charters, we had a total of 50 leaders, either in person or joining us by zoom. So the same model that you started then is still being continued on.

P Pat Sandro 15:37

Do Ya?

P Pat Sandro 15:55

They love to come.

D Don Cooper 15:56

They sure did. It was and after the couple of years that we had, it was really nice to see everybody in person again, and start engaging in person again with them. So you also have another unique perspective in that after you left Grand Valley, you served on the board of a charter school as well.

P Pat Sandro 16:15

Well, I really never served on a board. And J.C. asked if I'd be interested in going to Wellspring High School. Because I had I think I, I take some credit for having him charter a high school, I was telling him these parents in the K-8, want your kind of education, and you you should give it to them. You got to built in audience. And it worked. He mean, he had the Grand Rapids school, and then this one I don't know how many he's got now. But I went there, and it was fun. Again, it was an appointed board, and they wanted to be there. I wanted to be there. But I didn't administer. I just walk out after the board meeting. And they became the fifth highest performing high school in the state of Michigan, not my doing. The principal was outstanding. They hire great teachers. And interestingly, it was a high academic school. They, the first year they took two and a half million dollars in scholarships that the students won in competitions, and every student went to college. It was amazing that that happened.

D Don Cooper 17:47

So before meeting today, I was reviewing some of your old files from Grand Valley. And one thing that stood out was your commitment to a college going culture and promoting dual

thing that stood out was your commitment to a college going culture and promoting dual enrollment within Grand Valley for some of the schools that that we chartered.

P

Pat Sandro 18:03

I didn't know that, okay.

D

Don Cooper 18:05

So that is that's something we're still working on today and launching some new initiatives toward that. So the path that you set us on, we're still continuing on.

P

Pat Sandro 18:13

That's great. Good to hear.

D

Don Cooper 18:15

What were some of the most rewarding moments that you had as director of the charter schools office?

P

Pat Sandro 18:19

Well, really is people whose children graduated, went on to college. And they just can't forget that experience. They had young teachers, many from Grand Valley. But it's just it leaves a warm... I did I made the right decision. After telling Don "No".

D

Don Cooper 18:45

What were some of your most challenging experiences?

P

Pat Sandro 18:51

Well, I guess I have to tell you, I love a challenge. And if you talk to people, they want to, they want to be good, they want to be the best. And so you have a positive dealing with a problem going in. I can't remember a problem that perplexed me or I lost sleep over. But I had some good superintendents I'd worked with and we laughed and we had some funny experiences. And I can't say I had problems, like I had when I was superintendent of Grand Rapids. I'd lose sleep with what I was trying to do, and it was so difficult to get people on board.

D

Don Cooper 19:47

So Michigan just recently celebrated its 25th anniversary of the state's charter law.

D Don Cooper 19:52

Is that right?

D Don Cooper 19:53

Yeah. So looking back over your time in the last 25 years, what advice might you give to other states or other authorizers in other states that are just starting out now?

P Pat Sandro 20:08

Well, I can't imagine if other states are like Grand Rapids. And Grand Rapids had, you know, I had 34,000 kids in the schools, was a quality school system. But everything was a battle. And I can't blame it all on unions. But teachers will react to union leadership negatively, often. And you didn't have that with young first year teachers, second year teachers in charters. They work together, and they were producing curriculums. And they enjoyed their work. In fact, we got 3% of the state aid for the kids. I propose that we give it back to the schools in grants. And that was... I don't think Jim Goenner loved that, but, but he did it. [laughing]

D Don Cooper 21:14

And you know, we still do that today!

P Pat Sandro 21:16

Do ya?

D Don Cooper 21:17

Yup. So it's academic grant based on the performance of the school.

P Pat Sandro 21:21

Yeah.

D Don Cooper 21:22

And also on...

P Pat Sandro 21:23
I love to hear that!

D Don Cooper 21:24
...board members commitment to continuing to develop their capacity to govern through training. So every year it's up to \$20 per student, but it really is a good incentive for schools.

P Pat Sandro 21:37
See before that no principal could spend any money. They had no choices. There was no choice in a regular school. You just had to go there and perform and be evaluated. So that, that helped change things.

D Don Cooper 21:54
What do you see as Grand Valley's legacy in charters?

P Pat Sandro 21:58
Well, I think one would be the money we give, give the schools back to spend on the kids. That that's a great thing. And I'm glad to hear that you still have that. But I used to go to a board meeting, and people would say bless you Grand Valley. And I didn't know that that would happen. That we were on their side, we were on the parent side, I'd get... I'd go to a board meeting in Grand Rapids and not have 15 minutes of people coming to the mic and complaining. I never had that in a charter. We had some problems in charters, but they were minor.

D Don Cooper 22:48
So what do you see as your legacy in the charter space?

P Pat Sandro 22:54
Ah, I don't know. I was happy doing it. And I'd do it again, a 100 times. I was happy with what we did in Grand Rapids. We balanced the budget. We got contracts for everybody. I had nine unions that no contracts when I started. So those are wins that you have that you are proud of... but they don't, people don't remember. I used to go to the airport. I'd know two dozen people. I've gone to the airport 20 times since and I haven't seen a person that knows me yet.

D Don Cooper 23:42

But the important piece, you do it again.

P

Pat Sandro 23:44

Oh, I would do it. I'm glad I said yes.

D

Don Cooper 23:49

Great. Well, Pat, thank you very much for joining us today. And last question. Would you be willing to come by the charter schools office sometime, and meet the staff?

P

Pat Sandro 24:00

I went by yesterday, I had to take a prescription drugs to a blind cousin. And I looked and it was and it was on the highway, a sign said National Heritage, I didn't know they had moved there. I'd love to come.

D

Don Cooper 24:18

Great. We'd love to have you, love to introduce you to the staff and share what the charter school office has become based off the path you've set us on. So thank you.

P

Pat Sandro 24:25

Thank you very much.

D

Don Cooper 24:27

Appreciate it.