

Germann embraces



Sparks fly as 2016 OSBA President Eric K. Germann, left, and Vantage Career Center students watch welding instructor Brent Wright cut a piece of metal. Germann is a school board member at the career center and Lincolnview Local (Van Wert).

Challenges motivate new OSBA president

OSBA President **Eric K. Germann** is one who believes that life can bring you opportunities, even in the worst of times.

Take, for example, his grandfather, **Wilbur Pollock**, a star baseball player whose big dream was to play for the Chicago Cubs. As the story goes, Pollock was set to join one of the Cubs' minor league affiliates, but a fall from a haymow crushed those aspirations. A shattered elbow would end any hopes of becoming a big league baseball player.

"I believe I'm here today because my grandfather fell out of

that haymow," Germann said. "Had he gone on to play baseball, I probably wouldn't be here. But with those shattered dreams, he took advantage of the other opportunities he had and became a successful farmer and school board member."

Pollock served on the former **Ridge** School Board in Van Wert County from 1952 to 1957. Two years later, voters approved the consolidation of three school districts that included Ridge. That merger created **Lincolnview Local (Van Wert)**, named for the view of the Lincoln Highway that divided the new school district.

opportunities

*Scott Gerfen,
assistant editor*

Like his grandfather, Germann is continuing the family's legacy of board service. He has been a Lincolnview Local board member for six years and served at **Vantage Career Center** for two years.

During that time, the man who was selected by his peers to lead OSBA as its president in 2016 has turned opportunities into triumphs for the rural districts he serves in a time when funding school districts is no easy task. As a leader, Germann is principled in the notion that you should effect change rather than accept the status quo.

An opportunity for new revenue streams for Van Wert County and its schools arrived when the landscape of northwest Ohio began to change drastically. That landscape was transformed when hundreds of wind turbines began spinning in the breeze and producing electricity.

The Blue Creek Wind Farm, a more than \$600 million venture by Iberdrola Renewables, has delivered hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax revenue to area schools. Lincolnview Local alone has received more than \$400,000, which helped purchase Chromebooks for every student from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Germann, who has testified before the Ohio General Assembly on renewable energy legislation, has been a strong advocate of the wind farms. However, despite his efforts, some future projects have been tabled because of new restrictions passed by state lawmakers.

"This was a polarizing issue in the community," Germann said. "There are people who like them and people who hate them. But we were able to work with the community and legislators to say this is a huge revenue opportunity for the district and the farmers in the area. How do we find a win-win situation for everyone?"

That win-win situation brought more than additional revenue to Vantage Career Center, which has become an educational hub for students who want to obtain skills that meet specific business needs. It also brought the opportunity to offer training in a new career track through its wind turbine maintenance program. The program is conducted as part of the career center's Alternative Energy Academy, which came

about with the private-public partnerships created under Ohio Senate Bill 232.

"It helps to have a supportive board when you're trying to bring in a new program like that," Vantage Career Center Superintendent **Staci Kaufman** said. "Eric sees the range of students and understands that while all students might want to go to college, not all students are probably going to graduate with a four-year degree."

Germann's background lends itself to innovation and 21st century learning. He earned a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering and computer science from Ohio Northern University and a Master of Science in information and communication sciences from Ball State University.

He is the lead cloud networking architect at Newscycle Solutions, which delivers software solutions to more than 1,200 companies in the global media industry.



Germann shares a laugh with a student while visiting Lincolnview Junior/Senior High School.



Vantage Career Center welding students listen as Germann asks about projects they are working on.

The 1986 graduate of Lincolnview High School has served four terms as president of the Lincolnview board and represents the district as an OSBA legislative liaison, student achievement liaison and Delegate Assembly representative.

“He brings a presence of intellect and calmness, and he thinks out of the box,” said Lincolnview Local Superintendent **Jeffery T. Snyder**, who attended high school with Germann. “He’s allowed our district to look at the next stage in terms of where we want to go as a district. We could be the status quo, but under his leadership, it’s been about where do we go next.”

Germann service snapshot

Boards of education

Lincolnview Local (Van Wert) (six years) and Vantage Career Center (two years)

Local board offices

OSBA legislative liaison (Lincolnview); four terms as board president; service on numerous board committees

OSBA Northwest Region offices

Region president (one year); Executive Committee (six years)



Germann answers questions in a Lincolnview Elementary School classroom.

The OSBA Journal asked Germann to share his thoughts on the rewards and challenges of school board service, his plans for his year as president and the value of OSBA. Following are his responses.

What do you hope to accomplish as OSBA president?

I hope to continue to foster engagement and collaboration between board members within and across school districts as well as continue to foster engagement with education stakeholders across the state, including the legislature and those representing educators, administrators and staff.

There are many challenges unique to each district. However, through engagement and collaboration, we can find common ground to solve common problems. Doing so will allow us to have more time for the more difficult and unique challenges we all face.

Why is OSBA membership valuable?

Coming in as a freshman board member with a business/technology background, I was naive enough to believe it would be like any other business. You can’t effectively govern

OSBA offices

President (currently serving one-year term); president-elect (one year); Executive Committee (two years); Board of Trustees (four years); Legislative Platform Committee (five years); Nominating Committee (one year); Federal Relations Network (three years); Student Achievement Leadership Team (two years); Arrangements and Hospitality Team (one year); Capital Conference Planning Task Force (three years); Board Member Cabinet (three years); Delegate Assembly (five years); Investment Committee (two years)

National School Boards Association

National Nominating Committee (one year); Delegate Assembly (two years)

Occupation

Lead cloud networking architect at Newscycle Solutions

Education

Ohio Northern University, Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering and computer science; Ball State University, Master of Science in information and communication sciences

Commitment to community

Founding director of the Lima Regional Information Technology Alliance; past president of Middle Point Lions Club; past president of Midwest Electric Community Connection Fund Board of Trustees

Family

Wife Karen, five children and three grandchildren



A Vantage Career Center culinary arts student oversees Germann as he helps prepare a dessert dish in the center's kitchen.

if you don't understand how the system works and how it got to be where it is today.

OSBA membership is extraordinarily valuable to both freshmen and veteran board members in providing continuing education and professional development resources. The ability to leverage OSBA for "what if" or "why do we do that" is very appreciated to gain a deeper understanding to work toward a solution.

Why did you decide to serve on a public school board and why have you continued to serve?

I had served my community for nearly two decades as a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician (EMT). For several reasons, I left that line of service and was looking for another way to give back and serve the community. A spot opened on the ballot, and I ran as a write-in school board candidate.

Interestingly, there are a fair number of parallels to my service as a volunteer EMT and firefighter. There can be a crisis, although sometimes it just seems that way. Many times, people just need someone to talk to and be connected with the right services. Lastly, people rarely call to invite you to dinner or thank you for a good job. They usually call you with a problem, and it's your job to solve it.

I continue to serve because I enjoy the challenge. I find

governance and government to be a fascinating study of people and their interactions. As long as I feel I can add value to the conversation, I will continue to contribute my time.

"My greatest pride ... is seeing a student reach or exceed his or her potential given the circumstances laid before them."

How can school board members make the biggest impact on their districts?

Be willing to let your people take risks. Paradoxically, I talk about failure as a good thing. If an organization never experiences any failures, it isn't taking any risks. If an organization never takes risks, it will never innovate.

Create an environment of reasonable risk taking so your staff and students can innovate. Be willing to learn from them, and if the results aren't quite as expected, review it, learn from it and pivot.

What advice do you have for new school board members?

Listen first, and as author **Stephen Covey** writes, "seek to understand, then be understood." Research the issues, cast

your vote and then support the decision of the board moving forward.

What is the biggest challenge facing school boards?

It is the ever-changing landscape of education. The education system has taken a fair number of hits the past several years, some deservedly, some not. The changes being pushed down from the state and federal levels are not the solution, however. Those introducing changes, while well intentioned, rarely have education backgrounds. We then end up with a rapid cycle of change, like OTES (Ohio Teacher Evaluation System), state report cards, Ohio's New Learning Standards and other things.

This would seem to contradict my earlier assertion of failing to allow innovation, but making statewide changes uniformly with little professional educator input doesn't mesh with that assertion. The rapid innovation needs to happen at the local level and then shared statewide so others can adopt it in their locality if it has merit.

What achievements are you most proud of in your districts?

At Lincolnview Local, we secured a grant from the state and moved to a one-to-one (computer) initiative in less than a year with a complete technology overhaul. We implemented changes and embraced the model of innovate, evaluate and

pivot, if needed, to work through the overhaul. We've also laid the groundwork for implementing a STEM program and working with outside stakeholders in the alternative energy sector to leverage these stakeholders as a true partner, not just a taxpayer.

At Vantage Career Center, it's been amazing to see the accomplishments and placement rates of many of our students. For example, seniors are graduating with welding certifications and moving to high-paying jobs immediately after graduation. That is a great accomplishment with a lot of opportunity for our corner of Ohio. We've also partnered with the alternative energy sector to launch a program to train technicians to service wind turbines, a very growing niche market.

My greatest pride, though, regardless of the district in the state, is seeing a student reach or exceed his or her potential given the circumstances laid before them. For a great many of Ohio students, education may be the least of their worries.

Food and housing insecurity, even in rural northwest Ohio, is a real concern. To see those kids show up, do the work and say, "I'm not going to let this hold me back," humbles me greatly, and I'm glad to contribute whatever I can to facilitate those opportunities. ■



Germann listens as a medical technologies student explains her work at Vantage Career Center.