

## THE KEYS TO COLLABORATION:

# An Interview with Marvin Dereef



**Marvin Dereef** is chief financial officer of Fulton County Schools in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. Fulton County Schools is one of the largest school districts in the United States, serving more than 90,000 people with approximately 14,000 employees at more than 100 school sites. GFOA's **Matt Bubbness** talked to Dereef about working remotely and collaborating throughout an organization.

**M**arvin Dereef has worked at Fulton County Schools for nearly 12 years as budget director, deputy chief financial officer, and now as chief financial officer (CFO).

Before coming to Fulton County Schools, he worked for another school district in Georgia, and he was also the CFO for a rural school district in North Carolina. In recent years, Dereef has worked with GFOA's Alliance for Excellence in School Budgeting to make budget process improvements, and he has also served on the executive board of the Association for School Business Officials International (ASBO). GFOA and ASBO have helped him improve his skills, he said, by "following standards that are well recognized, well respected, tried and true, and have been tested across the country."

Dereef is proud of the recognition he's received for the district's work (from GFOA and ASBO, among others) for its budgeting and accounting reporting, and its AAA credit rating, which he views as "really signifying our efforts and our work over the years to execute sound financial management."

As CFO, Dereef oversees the district's Financial Services Division, which includes accounting, budgeting, retirement services, contracting/procurement, payroll and benefits, and risk management. He noted that one of his challenges has been getting his team comfortable

with expressing and sharing their opinions—regardless of title, experience, or role. He stresses to his staff how important it is for everyone to share their views and ideas, as this brings options to the table that decision-makers might not have considered. He also prefers to share differences of opinions openly rather than to find out about them after the fact from hallway and water cooler discussions, emphasizing his point with the line from the musical *Hamilton* about needing to be "in the room where it happens." Dereef also underscores how important it is for the team to come to a consensus about solutions, and to ensure that everyone is on the same page once the decision is made.

Dereef recalls that when he first started at the district as budget director, staff members found this free expression of views awkward. At one of those early meetings, an employee received reproachful looks for opening up and giving an honest opinion about the functioning and work of the budget department. Dereef had to interject and tell the rest of his staff that that was exactly what he wanted. "I wanted someone to be able to give me that (honest opinion) because I just came to the district and they had more insights into the budget, the budget department, and everything else in the district than I did," he explained. It takes time for people to get comfortable with this approach and be willing to share more openly, he cautioned, but it's worth the time and effort.

“

The key to collaboration is: Everyone has to understand what the end game is.”

#### COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

This emphasis on communication applies to the government as a whole. Dereef illustrates with an anecdote. An employee in the Facilities Department has a question about their paycheck and calls Payroll about it. This person has to be transferred to Human Resources instead. Dereef stresses that the employee doesn't know and probably doesn't care that the issue with their paycheck originated with Human Resources—they are just looking for a resolution. The paycheck reads “Fulton County Schools,” not Human Resources. Customer service is a district-wide issue, not a department-by-department issue. It's like passing the baton in a relay race, Dereef explained. Financial Services has a piece of the process, but it has to be in sync with the other departments involved in the process to ensure a smooth handoff and make sure the baton is not dropped. The approach has to be organization-wide, as opposed to a more siloed mindset.

Another example of why collaboration and communication are so important comes from the district's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Better communication brings with it a greater sense of trust, Dereef pointed out. Each staff member or department needs to understand their role from beginning to end. Consider the process of acquiring personal protective equipment. The types of materials must be researched and ordered. Someone has to make sure they arrive at the district's warehouse, are delivered to the school sites, and are used once they get there. “It takes a chain of people, and each one of us has to be well-informed about what's going on in order to make that happen. And it takes a level of trust,” he said. “Sometimes we can stumble over each other because we are trying to do everybody's job. Have trust in your partners, your teammates, that they're going to do what they need to do.” To accomplish the task at hand, “collaboration is very important, because what's the point of developing a process if it can't be executed?”



“I don't think there's anything that we do by ourselves—even though people will continually think that they can,” Dereef said. “You can achieve more with the help of others; and that is as simply put as it can be.” As a support function, Finance needs to find ways to collaborate and to support the mission and goals of the organization. Supporting the organization and supporting it well requires a deep understanding of what the players throughout the organization do and how Finance can best support their needs. Dereef brings up two of the greatest National Basketball Association dynasties in recent memory, the Chicago Bulls and the L.A. Lakers. Michael Jordan and LeBron James wouldn't have been able to be who they were without the support of Scottie Pippen and Anthony Davis, respectively, and their other teammates.

Collaboration isn't just about working together—it's also about creating a shared vision and understanding about where the organization is going and why. Communication ensures that employees across the organization understand each other. “The key to collaboration is: Everyone has to understand what the end game is. Or, as one of my fellow leadership team members says all the time, ‘What are we solving for?’ We all have to be in agreement about what we are solving for—basically, where is the finish line? You can't have good collaboration without knowing that.” Dereef further emphasized the need for a shared understanding of what the organization is trying to achieve and accomplish: “Lack of good collaboration is like a three-legged race where

no one has agreed on where the finish line is. If one person thinks the finish line is in one place, and another person thinks the finish line is somewhere else, you aren't going to make it—neither one of you.”

The district superintendent's leadership has also helped Dereef improve communication and collaboration, stressing its importance to the leadership team and throughout the district, along with the necessity for shared governance. In the past, Finance staff was brought to the table very late in conversations, after the majority of decisions had been made, when “they're just ready to ask for money.” He said: “If there's a 20-day problem, it has to be resolved in 20 days, right? But if you wait until the 18th day to include me, I'm stuck with only two days to think about it with my team. Give me more time to give you more options. The less time I have, the fewer options will be available. Give me more time and I can figure out some ways to get it done.”

#### PAYING ATTENTION

Dereef works to stay connected to the overall work of the district and its importance to his team. This includes simple things like including student artwork in the district's accounting and budgeting financial reports, which help to maintain that connection with the broader work of the district. As part of this effort, staff members are encouraged to go out to the district's school sites, including taking time to volunteer in schools. He is also part of the leadership staff who go out to school sites at the beginning of the school year to welcome students and help in any way possible, and to help “make sure we understand why we are here and to have that continuous connection.”

Dereef also stressed how important it is to not overlook the broader issues that staff members face outside of the office, such as the pandemic and systemic racism. “I think people hate when we ignore problems as if they aren't happening—pretend this isn't going on and just focus on work,” he said. “We need to acknowledge that people are coming into the office with things that they're dealing with outside of the office, acknowledge that, understand that. They know then that you connect with them, and they know you don't think of them as robots, but as people.” Recently, Dereef opened a division all-staff meeting with a discussion about how broader issues are affecting him and his staff, “what we're dealing with and how we must continue to move forward and progress, be productive, and be a great example to one another, and be there for each other as we go through this process.”

To help support staff and their needs, the district stresses employee wellness. It has a committee specifically focused on this, which Dereef is a part of,

“

You can achieve more with the help of others; and that is as simply put as it can be.”

with activities and information sessions to ensure a balanced work-life experience. Dereef also encourages his own departmental leaders to help alleviate stress with simple things. At the entrance to their building, the division has a whiteboard where staff members write riddles, jokes, or positive messages. This can be a conversation starter and way for staff to interact on topics that aren't related to work, which helps build connections. These messages also have a wider audience, as people—Dereef included—frequently share them with family and friends.

#### MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD TIME

It's been a hard year for all of us, but the difficulties have given Dereef the opportunity to do things differently and to make improvements. Remote work and social distancing have necessitated changes in the way documents are signed and meetings are conducted. The district didn't use e-signatures much before but quickly started making use of the technology. This change remains important now that district staff are back in the office as it avoids the routing of paper within and between departments and helps promote social distancing.

Financial Services staff weren't readily given the option to work remotely before COVID-19 hit, but it is something that will be considered once the pandemic is over, as Dereef has seen that it works—even better than working in the office, in some situations, because there are often fewer distractions at home for some than there are in the office. And virtual meetings, whether staff members are working at home or in the office (to promote social distancing), have created the added benefit of allowing Dereef to get his entire staff together without having to find a big enough space to accommodate everyone. ■

**Matt Bubness** is a Senior Manager with GFOA's Research and Consulting Center.