

Tom Nelson, Superintendent

1897 Delaware Avenue  
Mendota Heights, MN 55118  
P 651.403.7002 F 651.403.7010  
tom.nelson@isd197.org  
www.isd197.org

Tuesday, January 3, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

It is an honor and a pleasure to write a letter of reference for Mark Porter for the position of Superintendent of Schools of the Orange County Public Schools.

I have known Mark for the past seven years, first as an employee and then as a colleague and educational leader during his service as Superintendent of Schools. Mark's educational background as a teacher, coach, athletic director, director of employee relations, school board member and superintendent, as well as his legal training and experience made him a tremendous asset to our leadership team during my tenure as Superintendent of Schools in the South Washington County School District. When I retired, Mark was the obvious choice to assume the leadership the district.


During his tenure as superintendent in South Washington County, Mark has led a major reworking of the district's strategic vision. This effort had significant community and staff involvement and led to a renewed effort to improve student achievement. In short order, he took a district with several schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to this year seeing that all schools achieved AYP. Mark's thorough understanding and use of data-based decision-making, and his commitment to ongoing positive messages of improvement with staff and community, were key factors in the district's academic success.

Mark successfully manages a large district with over 17,000 students and over 2,500 employees. Doing so could not be accomplished without his ability to develop a strong leadership team and to delegate authority where appropriate. He has strong people skills and has earned a reputation as someone who listens to and respects other voices and opinions. He is an excellent communicator, both orally and through the written word. He has a thorough knowledge and understanding of school finance issues both on a statewide and local level and has been active at the Capitol advocating on behalf of public schools. His fiscal management and development of a community engagement process around local finance issues has resulted in the South Washington County Schools remaining in very good financial shape even during these tough economic times.

Mark is a person of high integrity. He always puts the students of the district first. In all of my years working closely with Mark, I always knew he would examine district issues from the point of view of what is best for students and families.

I highly recommend Mark Porter for the position of Superintendent of Schools for the Orange County Public Schools. He has a strong track record of success and is a proven organizational and educational leader.

Sincerely,



Tom Nelson



# Inver Grove Heights Community Schools

Independent School District 199

District Office  
2990 80<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
651-306-7800  
FAX 651-306-7295

Simley High School  
2920 80<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
651-306-7000  
FAX 651-306-7016

IGH Middle School  
8167 Cahill Avenue  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
651-306-7200  
FAX 651-306-7152

Hilltop Elementary  
3201 68<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
651-306-7400  
FAX 651-306-7444

Pine Bend Elementary  
9875 Inver Grove Trail  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
651-306-7701  
FAX 651-306-7739

Salem Hills Elementary  
5899 Babcock Trail  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55077  
651-306-7300  
FAX 651-306-7321

Community Education  
1515 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
South St. Paul, MN 55075  
651-306-3633  
FAX 651-306-3640

Kids' Choice  
1515 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
South St. Paul, MN 55075  
651-306-3634  
FAX 651-306-3640

District Website  
[www.invergrove.k12.mn.us](http://www.invergrove.k12.mn.us)

January 4, 2012

To Whom It May Concern,

*This letter is in reference to Mark T. Porter, an applicant for the position of Superintendent in the Orange County Public Schools. As superintendent at Inver Grove Heights, I have known Mark for seven years. We have had many opportunities over the years to interact. In that time I have noted the following qualities and values in Mark that I believe characterize him as a person and as a quality superintendent.*

*Integrity and steadfastness - Mark is a calming influence in any room. While others may speak swiftly and sometimes passionately in the heat of a discussion, Mark listens and considers. His ability to remain grounded and speak with consideration comes from his vast experiences and the wisdom that he has gained from these experiences. I believe it is this time for consideration that contributes to the clarity of his communications. Mark has demonstrated excellent communication skills in all venues that I have had the privilege of also being in attendance.*

*Intelligence - Mark has demonstrated several key facets of the intelligence necessary to be a successful superintendent. He is a quick learner, he is not afraid to ask questions, but knows how and when to ask the right questions. Mark understands the importance of timing. He has a strong understanding of the many facets of school leadership including facility planning, budget, finance, human resource management and strategic planning. He has provided leadership that has allowed ISD 833 to develop outstanding facilities. He has led his district in pursuit of awards of excellence. He has recruited, hired and trained one of the best leadership teams in the southeast metro. He is a collaborative leader. He provides a strong road map for others to follow and supports them in their work.*

*Balance - As superintendent of ISD 833, Mark has worked with a geographically large as well as an economically and socially diverse school community. Mark has successfully navigated the issues that this type of diversity can create, working diligently to build a district that is sensitive to the needs of all students while balancing the demands from the most vocal.*

*In summary, I have come to know Mark as a quality superintendent and a very good person. I believe he has the skills and experiences which make him an excellent candidate for the position. I strongly recommend your consideration of Mark Porter to lead the Orange County Public Schools. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.*

Sincerely,

Dr. Deirdre Wells  
Superintendent  
Inver Grove Heights Community Schools  
651-306-7808  
[wellsd@invergrove.k12.mn.us](mailto:wellsd@invergrove.k12.mn.us)





## South Washington County Schools

### Woodbury Middle School

Kari Lopez, Principal

Woodbury, Minnesota 55125

Phone: 651-768-4501 Fax: 651-768-

January, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I am pleased to write this letter of recommendation for Mr. Mark Porter for the position of Superintendent for the Orange County Public Schools. I have worked with Mr. Porter for the past 11 years, during his most recent position as Superintendent of South Washington County Schools and previously as Director of Human Resources and Legal Services.

As Superintendent of South Washington County Schools, Mr. Porter guided the district strategic planning process and navigated the articulation of a needed strategic vision for the future. His background in strategic planning is a strength which entails the inclusion of best practices and strategies, the ability to foster a spirit of excellence within a school district, and creating a collaborative environment to move the vision forward.

Mr. Porter has clear focus on leadership priorities and navigates conflict and change with a balance of being both a member of a team and its leader. When necessary, he is able to not waver when confronted with conflict and complex change. Mr. Porter's understanding of school finance and budget challenges which are essential to support the district's growth and development is strong and beneficial.

During our yearly School Improvement Retreats and Administration Meetings, Mr. Porter is an active participant and leader in the areas of student achievement and the understanding of our diverse student populations. One specific strength is Mr. Porter's skills of being at the table and assisting in conversation on what action steps are needed. He is a team player and is always willing to listen and provide feedback and/or recommendations when needed.

As a leader, Mr. Porter is able to set high standards and expectations in his role as Superintendent, while articulating the relevance to the public he serves. He is an exemplary leader who approaches educational leadership with a commitment to innovation and the relevant best practices needed to move the organization forward.

Over the years of our work together, Mr. Porter has demonstrated the breadth of his leadership qualities throughout times of great challenge and times for great celebration. He provided autonomy when relevant and direction when essential. The result of the fulfillment of his passion for quality education is that Mr. Porter is the type of Superintendent everyone dreams of having; committed, supportive, caring, and effective. Finally, Mr. Porter is a professional who improves results on a continuous basis.

In closing I recommend Mr. Mark Porter without reservation for the Superintendent position in the Orange County Public Schools. If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kari Lopez  
Woodbury Middle School Principal



*Jim Gelbmann*  
*2653 Cornelia Trail*  
*Woodbury, Minnesota 55125*  
*(651) 739-5575 (h) (651) 201-1344*  
*(651) 334-4077 (cell)*

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January 2, 2012

RE: Superintendent of Schools – Orange County Public Schools

To Whom It May Concern:

It is with mixed emotions that I write this letter of recommendation for Mark Porter for the position of Superintendent of the Orange County Public Schools. Mark is an exceptionally gifted individual and deserves an opportunity to pursue his career goal of leading a truly major public school system. At the same time, his advancement will leave a huge leadership vacuum on the South Washington County Public School's management team. I am a 12-year veteran Board Member of that District. It is no exaggerating to say it will be nearly impossible to find an individual as talented, diplomatic, determined and conscientious as Mark Porter. I would hate to see him leave South Washington Public Schools. However, throughout my professional life, I have learned to never stand in the way of someone's advancement, and therefore, I have agreed to write a forthright letter of recommendation for Mark.

I have had the unique opportunity to work with Mark as both a colleague on the South Washington County School Board (he and I were elected to the Board in 1995) and have later observed him as Director of Legal Services and subsequently as Superintendent for our District. In each capacity, Mark has impressed me as one of the most even-tempered, thoughtful and hard working individuals I know.

In my opinion, a school superintendent must have strong interpersonal communication skills. Superintendents must command the respect and confidence of their management teams. They must be able to communicate to all district employees that their services are valued. And they must communicate to the public that the schools are well managed and improving student achievement is the overall goal of the schools.

Mark Porter has consistently demonstrated his strong interpersonal communication skills, as both a school board member and as the Superintendent of Schools. During his service on the Board, Mark was well liked and respected by all of his colleagues. Although he did not chair the Board, he was the board member whom everyone looked to for guidance on difficult decisions facing the Board. Mark also has exceptionally strong professional relationships with our current management team. He works well with his colleagues and continues to be one of the most influential voices in the overall management of our district.

Previously, as Director of Legal Services, Mark was the District's primary labor negotiator – leading the efforts to settle collective bargaining contracts with thirteen bargaining units. He has been the District's top advocate for initiating "interest-based bargaining" processes with our teachers and several of our other employee groups. The interest-based bargaining process has enabled our district to settle most contracts early, at terms and conditions that the District can afford. Mark's strong interpersonal communication skills have also eliminated much of the hostility, damaged egos, and mistrust that was often present in traditional contract negotiation processes. He has taken the "us-verse-them" out of the negotiations and replaced it with constructive dialogue on how the interests of both parties can be addressed in a mutually-beneficial contract settlement. These changes remain as a valuable part of our district culture today.

January 2, 2012

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As Superintendent Mark has led the South Washington County Schools effectively through a period of significant growth and improvement. His calm style of leadership has maintained a positive district climate during and immediately following a period of very rapid change. His strong and effective communications have kept all stakeholders well-informed and engaged as the reputation, enrollment and most importantly student achievement results, including effectively addressing identified achievement gaps in the district have all been on the upswing.

My strong endorsement of Mark's qualifications for this Superintendent's position does not mean I agree with him on all issues. We have been on opposite sides of issues as colleagues on the school board. I have also opposed several of the proposals he has brought before the Board as Superintendent. However, my experience in these situations merely reinforces my perception of Mark as a person who is willing to consider the perspectives of other individuals. Mark is an exceptionally good listener. When there is disagreement, he makes a conscientious effort to fully understand the opinions of others. He respects the opinions and ideas of others, even if he may not agree with those opinions and ideas. He can also be extremely creative in finding the middle ground – forging solutions that meet the needs of all parties in a dispute. Equally important, Mark is not afraid to admit he made a mistake when a position he supported did not yield the results he anticipated.

Mark Porter's qualifications for the position of Superintendent of the Orange County Public Schools extend well beyond his interpersonal communication skills and his ability to lead a management team. Mark has also demonstrated his strong belief in public education and understands the challenges that face it. He recognizes that public schools must succeed in providing the highest quality of educational services to meet the needs of all children. If he is given the opportunity to oversee the management of the Orange County Public Schools, I am confident he will build on the past successes of the District and will continue the District's reputation as one of the best Districts in the State of Florida and the nation. Mark has succeeded in all challenges he has faced. I will stake my professional reputation on his ability to exceed all expectations your Board may set for him.

While I would hate to lose Mark's talents and character to another district, I believe I owe it to Mark to give him an honest and candid letter of recommendation. I would be pleased to discuss Mark's qualifications for the position of Superintendent of the Orange County Public Schools with any member of the selection committee. I can be reached at any of the three telephone numbers listed on this letterhead.

My best regards.

Sincerely,

Jim Gelbmann  
South Washington County Board Member