

The Birmingham News

City schools at key juncture

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The Birmingham public school system has been in the news more than it would like lately. I am referring to the controversy over allegations the superintendent altered a report produced by our organization, the Council of the Great City Schools, that was critical of the system's leadership and organization.

Regardless of the outcome of this controversy, I would hope it would not distract the school system and the citizens of Birmingham from what is really at stake here: getting back to business and fixing the myriad challenges facing the schools.

The Council of the Great City Schools had fielded a team of senior urban school managers from around the country to conduct a review of the Birmingham schools. The team found a school system that lacked strategic vision, coordinated planning and a sense of urgency; that was hampered by a glut of administrative personnel and a largely dysfunctional organizational structure; and that was facing increasing pressures from the state to both close schools and reduce a budget shortfall.

In short, the team found a school system that was ill-equipped to respond to its declining enrollment and shrinking resources, as well as to the growing public skepticism about its capability to improve.

These findings formed the core of our report. While the report was indeed critical, it also set forth recommendations designed to put the school system in a better position to move forward. Most of these recommendations focused on restructuring the organization and drafting a strategic plan for how the system should proceed, but these were just the beginning.

Despite any negative fallout from the current controversy, the Birmingham school system has the potential to pull itself back together. Student achievement in reading and mathematics has been rising steadily over the past several years due to the hard work of teachers and administrators. For example, the proportion of Birmingham's fourth-graders reading at or above proficiency levels on the state test rose from 64 percent in 2004 to 73 percent in 2007 — a rate of improvement that outpaced statewide increases. Similarly, the proportion of city fourth-graders doing math at proficient levels increased from 62 percent to 67 percent over the same period.

In addition, the school board has finally moved to phase out buildings where enrollments are low; and the district was removed by the state from sanction status under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

These are not trivial developments, to be sure. But the school district's leadership needs to develop a convincing plan to raise academic achievement in the city's schools well beyond state standards; to improve management and accountability for the system's scarce resources; and to build public confidence that it knows how to reform itself.

The Birmingham schools' leadership now faces a critical choice. It can take the steps necessary to substantially improve the district and the lives of the children in its charge, play a critical role in the revitalization of the city and increase public trust. Or it can keep things pretty much as they are.

Other urban public school systems across the country — such as those in Richmond, Atlanta, Miami and Philadelphia — have faced similar choices. Some of these school systems initiated reforms on their own, while others had the choices made for them by external forces.

But however they got there, those going down the path to improvement took similar steps.

These school systems developed a strong political consensus for reform; articulated clear goals for what they wanted to achieve; held their staff members responsible for progressing on those goals; created high standards and the instructional program to match; supported their teachers; used their data to monitor their progress; and strengthened their operations and finances to support the work in the classrooms. And these school systems saw similar results: higher student achievement and better management.

There is no reason Birmingham schools can't do what some of these other city school systems have done in order to make some of the same progress.

The message for Birmingham is that the greater payoff often comes from choosing the path of most resistance. If the school system makes the right choice, the Council of the Great City Schools is poised to return to help.

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