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Board to hire chief first, then reform

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The Birmingham Board of Education should delay school system reforms until the end of 2008 and focus on its search for a superintendent, Michael Casserly of the Council of the Great City Schools told board members Tuesday.

The board should move aggressively in the search for a permanent superintendent because "attempting anything more dramatic under interim leadership would simply be counterproductive," said Casserly, the council's executive director.

The Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington think tank for urban school districts, offered its help to the district in its reform efforts and in its search for a new superintendent.

Board members voted Tuesday to accept Casserly's report.

"We're taking the recommendations and we're going to make it work," said Board President W.J. Maye. The system will develop a strategic plan before hiring a new superintendent and the new superintendent will follow the strategic plan, he said.

"They will have to conform to what we want done," he said.

Originally, the council recommended the board have a strategic plan and organizational chart of its administration in place by the beginning of the 2008-09 school year.

However, Casserly said, "the controversy surrounding the falsification of the Council's initial report and subsequent resignation of the superintendent ... has made this suggested time frame impossible to achieve."

Instead, he said, the system should focus on building community support, stabilizing operations and finances, opening schools smoothly in August, and creating an interim organizational structure. The strategic plan, he said, should be developed by the end of the calendar year or when a new superintendent is hired.

This is the second set of recommendations made to the board by the Council of the Great City Schools. The initial review of the system's administrative structures, done in October, found, among other things, that the district had "no evidence of coordinated planning," "no sense of urgency or energy," and "middle-management bulge."

That report recommended reassigning employees, developing the strategic plan and hiring an in-house counsel to keep legal costs down, all before the beginning of the 2008-09 school year.

The report was altered by former Superintendent Stan Mims, who deleted 4½ pages of negative findings before distributing it to the public. In a settlement with the board, Mims resigned as superintendent in March.

Improvements, challenges:

After Mims' resignation, the board asked the council to reassess the district. During that review, the council found that while improvements have been made since interim Superintendent Barbara Allen took the helm, the Birmingham schools still "face substantial challenges in spite of its recent progress in improving the achievement of district students."

"The school system has lacked a strategic vision or well-articulated theory of action about where it was going and how it would get there. The school board, historically, had become bogged down in administrative issues. The system held no one to account for results. It lost students to other communities. It operated in an environment of decreasing resources. And it enjoyed weak community support," the report states.

"At the same time, the school district's administrative staff lacked much energy or sense of urgency to improve ... The district, moreover, suffered from poor communications, unclear lines of authority, and no performance standards."

The good news, the report states, is that the system is beginning to realize it can move forward.

"The interim superintendent and the school board, in fact, are showing renewed signs of determination and focus in their efforts to move the district ahead," the report states. "Barbara Allen is working diligently to stabilize the school district and articulate a strategic direction for the next permanent superintendent." News staff writer Toraine Norris contributed to this report. mleech@bhamnews.com