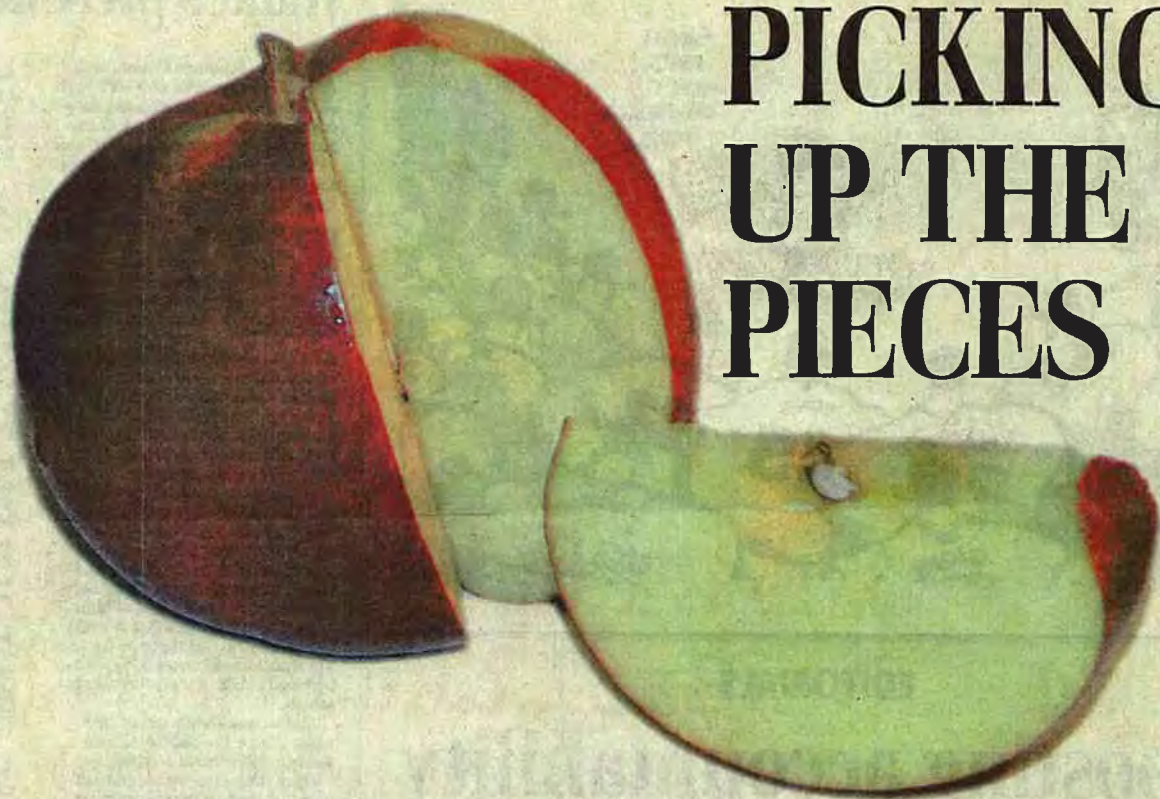


*All the tools for a revitalized city school system are at hand and ready to use. The most recent challenge to close or consolidate schools provides a chance for fiscal, managerial and academic efficiency that must not be missed. Effective answers to those challenges will jump-start reform and energize the entire system.*



# PICKING UP THE PIECES

## New initiatives challenge Birmingham schools

By MICHAEL J. FRONING and ERIC J. COOPER

**T**he Birmingham News, in a Dec. 4 editorial, challenged the Birmingham city school district and, by extension, the entire community, to come up with "a new look, from top to bottom" for the school system.

We believe all the tools for a revitalized city school system are at hand and ready to use. The most recent challenge to close or consolidate

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schools provides an opportunity for fiscal, managerial and academic efficiency that must not be missed. Effective answers to those challenges will jump-start reform and energize the entire system.

The first challenge is always to support the teachers. There is already an effective model for teacher growth and development being implemented in some Birmingham schools.

A partnership among city schools, the National Urban Alliance and UAB, called the TRUST Initiative, has given hundreds of existing teachers the information and understanding they need to support children from every background and new skills to prepare their students to succeed in college. The partnership is also delivering highly qualified beginning teachers for the new urban school imperative our city and nation face.

The TRUST partnership has begun dismantling the achievement gap to address the issues that keep children from seeing their highest possibilities. Schools have worked hard on the model, and in those schools test scores are improving significantly; teachers and principals are enthusiastic and reporting higher grades for their students. Since the TRUST model has an emphasis on high intellectual performance and not just "test prep," the future is even brighter. The new reality of closing schools will actually make faithful implementation of this model easier with fewer buildings and better use of available time.

### THE PIECES

The TRUST Initiative:

- ▶ Gives existing teachers the information and understanding they need to support children from every background and new skills to prepare their students to succeed in college and delivers highly qualified beginning teachers for urban schools.

Yes We Can! Birmingham:

- ▶ Meetings to be held citywide for open discussion about the schools and their future.

Blueprint for School Readiness:

- ▶ Another visioning process that has already made an impact with Gov. Bob Riley's recent announcement to expand pre-K in Alabama.

## SCHOOLS: Pain can be turned into gain

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Another development is a community-wide process called Yes We Can! Birmingham. Soon, meetings will be held in every sector of the city for open discussion about the schools and their future. Results from this comprehensive opinion survey will guide a new education foundation managed by the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham as they invest in local school projects for the next decade or more.

Modeled after initiatives in other cities across the country, this process will allow Birmingham residents to have a voice in school planning, and they can use that voice in a supportive way.

This follows directly on an-

other visioning process, the Blueprint for School Readiness, that has already made an impact with Gov. Bob Riley's recent announcement to expand pre-K in Alabama. Imagine the power of pre-K-to-college reform.

### New ideas

Also helping are new ideas like Mayor Larry Langford's laptop initiative, which can show the world that Birmingham, the heart of the civil rights movement, is an innovator in making education the new civil right. Consolidating schools, upgrading facilities, modernizing the technology — all of these things renew the spirit and energy of depleted systems and demonstrate the community's desire to have a modern, successful set of schools, even though their number is smaller than before.

Sure, there is pain involved when neighborhood schools are closed. But, that pain can

be turned into gain when we realize there is little to be gained in schools so small as to actually hinder the development of a high-quality, modern curriculum.

A straightforward example relates to offering Advanced Placement courses in every high school. It's a good idea. The research is clear: The best predictor of success in college is that a student takes the most challenging high school curriculum available.

Not every student is ready to take an AP class in every subject, so the number of students who want to take AP calculus, for example, is relatively small. If the high school itself is small, then the calculus class has very little chance of having enough takers to justify a teacher.

Music, art, world languages and other noncore courses all follow this same pattern, and it's true at every level. Small schools give opportunities for more personal attention, but they are very inefficient aca-

demically.

When a system is challenged financially like Birmingham, academic efficiency is a critically important consideration.

Birmingham is blessed with committed elected and appointed officials, unions, stakeholders and faith-based leaders and citizens who can come together for the common good and answer the formidable challenges we face. Teams of like-minded leaders can indeed effect change for the betterment of our entire community. And yet, changing the belief systems about who can learn in any community is labor intensive. Enabling all students to succeed in an environment where schools are closing and money is tight requires a level of commitment that rises to the moral high ground of our expectations — not only for our own children, but for other people's children, too.

Birmingham students are writing their life stories, and

we want their stories filled with hope. Galvanizing a community such as Birmingham, and then a nation in the spirit of a new social justice movement, spearheaded by

renewed education communities, is the next frontier for urban areas across America. Schoolchildren in Birmingham deserve nothing less.