



The Birmingham News

Opinion - Let new civil right of education begin in Birmingham

Sunday, November 30, 2008

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In education reform, urban education is where the rubber meets the road.

For America to remain competitive, it must release the Gordian knot of low expectations and achievement in urban schools. The international competition our nation faces demands that any American who wants to go to college be prepared to do so. Where better to win this new civil rights struggle than here in Birmingham?

The late Ron Edmonds suggested we can, wherever we wish, teach all children whose education is of interest to us. Whether we do it successfully depends on how we deal with the fact we have not done so thus far. Edmonds believed successes are the weapons we need to attack the historical lack of will to raise achievement levels of children of color and poverty.

The attack begins when citizens believe in the academic potential of every student. This belief surfaced during 2008 as thousands of citizens described their visions for the future in the Yes We Can! Birmingham process (www.yeswecanbirmingham.org). Implementing their vision falls heavily on the schools and the teachers, and is a daunting challenge.

President-elect Barack Obama has called for the hiring of "an army of new teachers," and his historic election brings hope to millions with a renewed belief change will come. If we join together, through force of will, an unshakable belief in our children and coherent, directed action, change will also come to Birmingham.

A study from the Brookings Institution suggests ending rigid requirements for teacher certification and making tenure more difficult so ineffective teachers can be weeded out. It recommends bonuses for teachers in low-income schools. Others, including some in Alabama, have suggested performance pay for teachers.

We have a better plan. Professional development that demonstrates effective interventions with students has shown skeptical teachers and administrators that all students can succeed. Research by the Council of the Great City Schools shows that combinations of policy and practice can raise achievement of urban students above historic averages.

In Birmingham, the partners of the TRUST Initiative - the Birmingham City Schools, the UAB School of Education and the National Urban Alliance - have established strong exemplars that support the district as it develops and implements its strategic plan.

The dropout rate in Birmingham City Schools is now under the state's average. Also, in the past four years, schools meeting state and federal performance goals have increased. Now, the majority of schools (87 percent) meet those goals, and the number of students performing at higher levels in all schools has dramatically increased.

The NUA and its partner districts have narrowed achievement gaps. In Albany, N.Y., the partnership produced measurable gains in achievement: proficiency up 14 percent in English, 21 percent for math, and two-year performance increases of up to 25 percent for some schools. In Seattle, African-American students in NUA classrooms doubled the pass rate of students in non-NUA classrooms. Scores doubled on the state writing examination for 10th-grade African-American students.

At UAB, the Urban Teacher Enhancement Program graduates top-notch new teachers for Birmingham and other urban districts as the impact of the new UAB Center for Urban Education begins to be felt. The

training and mentoring provided these new teachers support their development into top professionals who will be leaders in Birmingham schools for many years.

Change is in the wind. School change happens in classrooms, one at a time. Progress will come when it happens in all classrooms at once. The Yes We Can! data confirm Birmingham's desire and commitment to change. Citizens have been clear about what they want. But we want to be clear that the Birmingham City Schools and its partners are not starting from scratch. Successful work by city schools educators and community stakeholders is improving the trajectory of the system's students.

Opportunity:

The Nov. 4 election provided an opportunity to create education and economic improvements in Birmingham and throughout the nation, beginning with renewed beliefs, hope and determination in our community and its schoolchildren and optimism for their future.

We'll sustain the change if we embrace the African proverb: "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go farther, go together."

The education of all children is critical for all of us. The American economy, policy and society have a stake - an investment - in all children growing into contributing members of America. To be indifferent to this civil right is to be shortsighted, wasteful and wrong. Eric J. Cooper is the president and founder of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. E-mail: e_cooper@nuatc.org. Barbara Allen is the interim superintendent of the Birmingham City Schools. E-mail: bsallen@bhamcityschools.org. Michael Froning, Ed.D, is the dean of the UAB School of Education. E-mail: mfroning@uab.edu.

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