



The Birmingham News

The positive side of our city schools

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I am a person who has spent my career mostly in positions that were not in the public eye. That all changed earlier this year, when I was made acting and then interim superintendent. Now people recognize me wherever I go. It has been an interesting transition, especially considering the kinds of comments I am getting from perfect strangers:

"I am sorry for you."

"I wouldn't want your job."

"I am praying for you."

Such comments bother me, because I don't see my position as a burden. Instead, it is a great opportunity to further serve 28,500 of the most precious and wonderful children on this planet. Having a hand in the education of Birmingham's children has brought great joy and fulfillment to my life for 36 years, and now I am in a position to do even more.

I admit there are some challenges: Budget shortfalls and constraints are at the root of most of them. The fact that perception far outweighs reality in our society is another. I am happy to say the reality is that there are many good things happening in the Birmingham City Schools.

Everyone probably is aware that children at Glen Iris Elementary School recently received XO laptops for a pilot project exploring how the laptops can be integrated into classroom instruction. I want to praise the dedication of the faculty at Glen Iris, district technology staff and others who worked night and day to prepare for the distribution. Dozens of teachers attended training the previous weekend.

But did you know that the school district has been partnering with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education and the University of Alabama at Birmingham for the past several years in the TRUST Initiative?

The TRUST Initiative is a grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Its goal is to train and retain urban teachers. The initiative depends on teachers being willing to participate in professional development activities.

Woodlawn High School Principal Shirley Graham recently received NUA's Leadership Award, a national award honoring principals who have shown dramatic leadership in improving their schools' climate and achievement.

We have several other grants, including a new Teaching American History grant from the federal government. The \$974,278 grant will continue for two years the activities the district began after it received its original grant in 2004.

In 2006, the district received a \$2.7 million, three-year Tapping Academic Potential grant. The grant is training teachers to help them increase the number of honors, pre-Advanced Placement and Advanced Placement courses in our high schools.

The grant is working. This month, 100 more students are taking Advanced Placement exams than in 2007 because we increased the number of AP offerings in our schools.

The district has been a virtual whirlwind of positive activities the past few months.

We are taking seriously the criticism contained in the report we received from the Council of the Great City Schools in January, including the lack of a strategic plan. We are using the five goals the board set last year

as the framework for a new plan. We are almost ready to take a draft to the community.

We also are preparing for a team from the Council of the Great City Schools to be in the district May 27-29 to help us restructure areas of the school district.

Administrators, principals, teachers, parents and students all are busy preparing for the transition that will take place when five schools close at the end of the school year and students move to different schools in August. Students are meeting together, PTAs are welcoming new parents and team-building activities are being scheduled for faculties this summer.

I am looking to the future as well, and there is much to do. I am determined to achieve goals during my tenure as interim superintendent to help realize my vision for this system.

The district must become and remain fiscally sound. We must operate only the number of schools we need and employ the staff we need to effectually institute a sound academic program. We must operate efficiently, putting into effect all cost-cutting and preservation initiatives and prioritizing based solely on direct effect on the education of our students.

The level of teaching and learning must be raised to prepare our students for the "demanding cognitive age" of the 21st century. No Child Left Behind requires our schools to make adequate yearly progress. Adequate is not good enough for our children; we must excel.

For that reason, we will look at every employee, every department, every initiative, every strategy and methodology, and weigh the effect on student achievement. All employees must have as their ultimate goal ensuring the best possible educational experience for our students.

We also must implement a building program that ensures every child learns in a safe, orderly, aesthetically pleasing environment. The 2007 enrollment projection study and our own research have given us a glimpse into the future distribution of population in our system. The recently adopted capital improvement plan will meet the physical needs of our students.

Finally, we must revitalize our sports program. Athletics can do so much for our students, promoting pride, character development, team spirit and sportsmanship, as well as providing a source of college scholarships. We must have such necessities as better athletic facilities, well-trained coaches and a supportive community. We have taken a big step by including stadiums and field houses for our high schools in the construction plan.

I know my vision cannot be realized during my tenure. But I am determined to lay the foundation, to plant the seed, to begin the journey.

So I ask supporters to continue praying for me and also to join me in creating a brighter future for our most valuable assets - our children. Barbara S. Allen is interim superintendent of Birmingham City Schools.
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