
The Cleveland schools: what works, and what needs work

Have you ever been to a Cleveland school board meeting? I went to my first one Thursday night — the last one for Barbara Byrd-Bennett, departing CEO. There were more than dignitaries and resolutions.

There were riveting displays of talent by students of the arts; the recitation of “life-altering” experiences of the high school interns who worked in science laboratories under a grant from the Cleveland Clinic; the introduction of 20 young men who were picked by recommendations from teachers and counselors to go free to Baldwin-Wallace College in the summer,

while studying to graduate from high school. When they graduate, they will get complete scholarships from Byrd-Bennett and the college.

Under Byrd-Bennett’s watch, there are four new school buildings, and the beautifully restored John Hay High School will have an open house in April.

The \$278,000 for Byrd-Bennett’s salary for her hard work and generosity does not begin to compare with the \$600,000 buyout for one of those two-year, revolving-door superintendents of the past.

The words I heard on Thursday were “vision,” “mentor,”

“love,” “putting the children first.”

“I learned so much from you,” was echoed repeatedly.

“You listened to our ideas and didn’t criticize us,” one student said.

And, “We will miss you,” was recited by staff, students and parents.

That will be echoed by the community at large, whether it knows it or not.

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What characterized the 1917 school survey (Plain Dealer, Feb. 5)

was new direction in governance and management for the municipal district. It was a centralized system designed to maximize professional and business influence. Among other things, this approach reduced the influence of parents, neighborhoods and the public. Recent change to a nonelected school board wasn’t so much a reform as it was a continuation of 1917.

This approach has resulted in a disconnect between school and community, parent and a child’s education. It is a source of much that ails large, urban districts.

Today, we are stuck in an old, paternalistic paradigm, as the

Cleveland school board fails to see its own role in enabling the failures of the Barbara Byrd-Bennett administration. As columnist Sam Fulwood recognized (Jan. 12), Byrd-Bennett’s undoing was that “she lost her public.”

The framework set in motion in 1917 and continued in 1997 creates an imbalance in which parents, neighborhoods and the public are disadvantaged, schools are disconnected from neighborhoods, and the role of parents is diminished.

The heart of any change will have to correct this imbalance.

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