

Eight Steps To A Better District

From Jonathan R. Narcisse, Des Moines School Board Member
First draft for public review

Introduction

This is the first public draft of Eight Steps I believe will help fix our Des Moines School District. It is the product of years of engaging the education issue in Iowa and months of focusing solely on Des Moines. At this point I will not itemize the effort. I will simply say it was thorough and comprehensive and it is a collective, not individual work.

These ideas have been presented on a less formal basis through local media. Now I am releasing them to a broader public searching for feedback, input, improvements and recommendations.

Our district is broke. That's the bad news.

Our district can be fixed. That's the good news.

The opportunity to fix it is within our grasp. Three seats are available September 9th on the Des Moines School Board. As soon as September 16th the implementation of real solutions and the return of this district to parents, students, citizens and taxpayers can commence.

What is implemented, however, must be sound. So in addition to direct feedback through email, phone conversations and one-on-one meetings, hearings on these eight points will be held throughout the city much like my fall Listening Posts.

I await your response.

Challenge

The challenges facing educating children in the Des Moines School District seem daunting. Recent reports document the severity of the crisis. The Johns Hopkins University National Study found few Drop Out Factory High Schools in Iowa - only eight. Yet Des Moines, with only 1.4% of the state's high schools had 37.5% of the state's Drop Out Factory High Schools. Three out of our five traditional high schools were named Drop Out Factory High Schools by the legendary institution's report.

A compilation of proficiency data released earlier this month found that Des Moines ranked 331 out of 341 districts measuring proficiency throughout Iowa for fourth and eighth graders. Des Moines ranked 353 out of 364 for all ranked districts in the same report.

The crisis has been marketed as a racial or socioeconomic problem yet even affluent White students in our district struggle, too, losing between 20-40 points in reading, math or science between 5th and 8th grade. Less than 50% of our district's students served as freshman are graduating four years later. Less than 50% of our white, black, Latino and Native American students served as freshman are graduating four years later. Only Asian students served by our district as freshman have more than 50% of their racial demographic graduating four years later.

Most telling is the cycle of massive 9th grade failure in our district followed by staggering levels of attrition as students become eligible to drop out. On average 600 to 8000 new 9th graders will fail in Des Moines. Once failed, as high school principals I've met with have pointed out, these students never recover but fall farther behind. Finally as drop out eligible 10th graders they phase out of the system. We do not document them as drop outs. We use various ways to count them such as expected to re-enroll but the harsh reality is we lose them. For example the district recently reported to the U.S. Department of Education 97.9% participation on the Iowa Test of Educational Development administered by law to our 11th graders - 1,624 out of 1,659 students were tested. Less than 12 months earlier, however, 2,624 10th graders were served by our district. That's 1,000 students unaccounted for. Examining enrollment data those students did not transfer to area school districts as failing sophomores. We know that based on an examination of area school district records. We know 1,000 students didn't just decide to scatter to other parts of Iowa or in droves leave the state. Rather those students swell the ranks of juveniles entering our county and state justice system, our human services system or that become runaways or are lost to the streets.

Compounding the problem are building level security and safety concerns, low staff morale, unacceptable working conditions, a lack of adequate discipline and poor attendance. In October I asked for data to confirm or

refute reports that thousands of students district wide were already in violation of our attendance policy. At one school alone it was reported that more than 600 students were in violation of the district's attendance policy.

To date the administration has not provided current attendance data but reports indicate as of the end of January the problem is much more severe than in October.

On June 28, 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court ended the use of race as the sole criteria for school desegregation save for those districts under court ordered desegregation plans.

Iowa has an open enrollment law that all but six districts have been operating under. Those six districts, including Des Moines, had within the law a variance that allowed them to deny requests for open enrollment to families with White students. Racial minorities were under no such restrictions.

With the end of race based desegregation the state notified districts immediately of the impact of the decision. In order to keep their variances the affected districts would need to file desegregation plans, using different criteria than just race, by March 1, 2008. The state also set aside time in September and throughout the fall to engage this issue.

Facing the greatest paradigm shift in modern district history our school board waited until January 22, less than 40 days before a plan must be filed, to have its first information session on the topic. On September 11th, two days after getting elected, I raised the issue to Dick Murphy and again a couple weeks later at a private meeting following his election as president of the board. On September 20th I asked our superintendent if we could address the issue at an upcoming board meeting.

Meanwhile the Postville School District has already completed and filed their desegregation plan with the state.

The Good News!

As I complete this document the state of our district is frightening. The challenges seem overwhelming. So is there any good news? Absolutely!

For the past few months I have met with every high school principal, nearly every middle school principal and many elementary principals. I have sought out community, civic, political and business leaders, parents and, of course teachers and district employees and received their input. I have also ground pounded and reached out to parents, including at their homes.

Surface evidence indicates the voters of this district want change. Otherwise we wouldn't see annual turnover at the board level. The problem has been that when new board members arrive they are forced to comply with a dysfunctional mechanism. Eventually those most denied access become the guardians of the old ways. In many ways being a member of the Des Moines School Board has been like joining a fraternity, being hazed, and eventually ascending to protector of the order.

Meanwhile voters for years have thrown board members off. In contrast legislators, county supervisors and city council people representing Des Moines rarely face legitimate opposition and are almost never defeated. School board incumbents, beginning with the board president, have rarely been re-elected the past few years. Including the three term incumbent and sitting board president I defeated despite my having raised less than a \$1,000 competing against his massive war chest and list of powerful and entrenched supporters.

While this turnover has created instability at the board level it also serves as affirmation that people care enough to make change. They just haven't had board members, once they've arrived, follow through with the desired change. Until now.

Another encouraging sign is that both at the legislative level and at the civic level we live in a state ready to aid our schools. From the passage of the local option tax to Rotarians reading in our schools this state and community is committed to public education. The problem is a level of systemic corruption and bureaucratic abuse that thrives and exploits public good will.

We have codified these bureaucratic protections. For example I have a friend who was a professor at Northwestern University. She has since moved to Iowa and taught teachers. But she cannot, based on our education code, teach my eight year old. Paul Knupp, who ran for the school board this year, has taught teachers currently teaching in this district. Yet by law he cannot teach my 6th grader.

If a Harvard professor, having just won the Nobel Prize, developed a curriculum we implemented as a state or district, moved to Iowa and wanted to teach 1st graders she would not be allowed to by state code.

This is just one example of the insanity that governs education in Iowa based on how our education bureaucracy

has used our passion for public education to pervert the administration of it. But there many, many more.

What has allowed them to get away with this?

We really care about public education in Iowa. That's the good news.

Local option tax dollars were not utilized as promised. This singular betrayal has threatened the ability of our district to go to the taxpayers and get what we need to fix our declining and decaying school buildings. At the same time the betrayal never would have been possible had voters not been supportive of our schools. Local option taxes funding various entities and projects have consistently failed in Polk County. When the money was promised solely for schools, however, the tax passed easily.

So we know that the public wants accountability but we also know the residents of this community will support public education when called upon. As will civic, business, religious and political leaders.

We have to work on parental involvement but this has not been a concern of our district. Some of the most outdated provisions of our 100 through 800 series policies and procedures have been the sections addressing parental involvement and participation. It simply has not been a priority of this district. And when I brought up the prospect of board members doing the same thing to get parents involved that we did to get the local option tax passed and to get elected - go door-to-door, phone call, have house parties and meetings at community centers and churches, the sitting president of the board mocked the concept.

We cannot fix this district without doing two things. One, we must increase parental accountability. Before we can talk about increasing parent participation we must address the lack of parental accountability. Parents must accept responsibility for many areas we've usurped from them. Parents must hold their children responsible for behaving while at school. Parents must accept responsibility when their children fail to learn year after year after year. In many ways our schools are viewed by parents as day care centers. They are not. So we must foundationally address parent accountability.

Two, we must address parent participation. Public education has asserted first tax payers, then educators, then corporate and civic contributors, etc...are responsible for the mechanism and the sustaining of the function of public education. Down the line, if at all, we find the parent. This isn't working. We must invert the system so that on the front end empowered parents, often made to feel insignificant in their child's academic success, are present. Only in this way can we also invert the system so that teachers can focus primarily on teaching.

Still, when I talk to parents I find they are committed but they don't know how to help their children. They are frustrated and feel diminished by our current system. A Des Moines parent cannot even get on our school board agenda at present. This is different in most Iowa school districts but we aren't most Iowa school districts.

Still there is evidence that when parents are made to be accountable they rise to the moment. In Waterloo, for example, when they ended social promotion and nearly 400 students failed not a single parent came to the superintendent or the district and raised hell. Instead they asked "what can we do to help our children."

Is there a guarantee parents will respond and do their job as parents? No.

Is there a guarantee our schools will continue to fail miserably leaving defending the outcomes as our only course if we don't make parents accountable and increase their participation? Absolutely!

The Listening Posts I held were also a powerful affirmation that people care about education in this community. I was pleased with the ideas that came forward and many of them are contained in the details of the Eight Steps I recommend to begin fixing this district.

Finally, I have found hope in our buildings. I talked to a middle school principal that has visited every one of his student's homes. I have met staff that goes into some of the most blighted and violent areas of our community to speak to parents about what can be done to save our kids. While our district generates adequate money to educate kids that money doesn't filter to the building levels. So we only one middle school in Des Moines has a full-time librarian. Guidance counselors have been cut. Art and music programs that both helped learning and freed teachers to plan have been gutted.

So now we find at the building level teachers compensating by spending hours away from their families to work early in the morning and late at night to help our kids. We find building staff spending their own money - administrators and teachers - to compensate for the inadequate resources they get at the building level.

While our Central Administration found the resources to move from Cassidy to plush downtown offices we've seen where our building level staff has worked in conditions most of us would never accept. In one instance the toilet seats used at an elementary school looked like they had been acquired at a recently demolished bus station. After a parent distributed pictures of them they were replaced. We have teachers teaching from carts. We lack

a meaningful discipline policy and so students too often are openly defiant and belligerent towards our building educators.

Still, the teachers in this district want to be here. They want to accept the challenge of reaching and teaching these kids. In their dedication we find the strength of this district. We need to build upon their passion, commitment and sacrifice.

And it is with the eight steps begin.

Eight Steps

1. Allocate a minimum of 90% of the money generated at the building level to the building generating the dollars.

This addresses two key concerns. First we significantly increase the dollars available at the building level. This is vital. For example only one middle school in Des Moines has a full-time librarian. Through this formula we could significantly increase staffing, reduce class sizes and address key needs like music and art programs.

Second it would reverse a disturbing trend in public education. The further away from the child the bureaucracy is the more power, authority and resources we vest in the bureaucracy. We have competent educators at the building level. They spend hours of their free time and hundreds, if not thousands of their dollars to help educate our children. If we can trust them with our children we should be able to trust them with the power, authority and resources to educate our children.

As we decentralize the academic function we need to improve two areas of administration. First we need to staff key positions with persons that are professionals in the area they are hired, not just former teachers or principals. Second we need to improve our citizen input infrastructure to tap into expertise and insights lacking at the board and bureaucracy levels.

Note: As a district we will spend an average of just under \$13,000 per pupil. Only a fraction of that is currently spent at the building level. Spending 90% at the building level would still leave between \$25-30 million for the bureaucracy. This is not an insignificant dollar figure.

2. End social promotion and move to skill based progression.

Currently in our district a student can miss 150 days of school, fail every course and promote year after year until 9th grade. Then we start failing the students. This has proven disastrous. Instead we need to move to skill based progression. If a student excels we should no longer limit that student to the mediocre middle but use project based learning to maximize the potential. At the same time if a student struggles we need to work with that student until the foundation blocks are in place. The practice of promoting poor students while we stunt the academic growth of many outstanding students has failed us. Skill based progression linked to authentic assessments is much superior.

3. Laptops and the internet for every student.

While many affluent districts have already moved to this in parts of our country many urban districts struggle to provide even basic learning materials like up to date texts. Students can carry libraries on their laptops, have up to date instructional materials, preserve teachers' notes and reduce the health consequences from carrying text laden back packs.

Once home students would be able to access the internet, communicate with teachers, do research and compete with their more affluent counterparts. Also by allowing them to personalize the computers they would be much more mindful caring for them than their current texts.

A key component of this is taking advantage of state and local resources in creating meaningful curriculum. Wherever we see local staff participate in selecting and creating curriculum the quality of instruction is superior, the students are more engaged and achievement is significantly improved.

4. Meaningful Instruction

The time has come for the district to recognize the varied needs of our students as well as key subject instruction proven to enhance achievement while developing better members of our society.

A. Get away from the teaching the test curriculum and return to a more classic education. Every student entering

our district should have music instruction, art instruction, physical fitness and learn a second language at the early elementary level. Waiting until middle school is too late. These efforts added to reading, science, mathematics and other areas of study over the years such as geography, history, economics will empower our students to do more than compete in the global market place, it will prepare them to thrive.

We teach math, math, math because it is politically palatable. We know if we teach math, music and a second language to our elementary students they will be better at math and science. The time has come for us to do what's best, not what's easiest. We know students that develop their creativity early on are also better scientist, better readers, etc...

B. Full time vocational and technical education at the high school level and expanded vocational and technical offerings at the middle school level will provide academic and career opportunities for large numbers of students we are currently losing. The cost of academic failure is documentable and staggering. Some ask how can we afford this. How can we not when we add up the cost from the justice system, welfare system, illness maintenance system and lost productivity?

C. A (K-12) School of Fine and Performing Arts. This is one of the offerings that could help us to compete for students regionally. We would also tap into the genius of many of our students where that talent is lost currently to both them and the world.

D. An Advanced Academic Academy, including an advanced science program and an advanced capitalism curriculum.

5. Return to neighborhood schools and create community schools.

Students should be allowed to attend the school or school district they want in compliance with Iowa's Open Enrollment law, including their neighborhood school. The time has come to put an end to the failed social experiment of busing. By doing so we will also improve on parent participation.

We must not stop there, however. Despite attempts to ignore core facts many of our students are arriving at school at 6:00 a.m. I met with a middle school principal just days ago who struggles with this problem. So let's eliminate it as a problem.

Our schools have the best locations in town. Let's open them early staffing them with volunteers. We could have early morning fitness going on, or tutoring, or music and art instruction. We should also keep them open into the night as community centers. Adult education offers some wonderful programs but on a regional basis. Why not have our schools hosting parenting classes, and ball room dancing, and Monday Night Football gatherings while the kids play in the gym, for example.

In a district with high levels of poverty community schools would go a long way towards building community, stretching budgets, and treating the emotional and social consequences of poverty. Community has always been a powerful remedy in impoverished areas. Let's take advantage of this fact.

6. Volunteer Corps

Citizens volunteer in sporting leagues because their volunteerism has structure to it. We need to take a chapter from this and create a staffed Volunteer Corp that can recruit, assign, coordinate and evaluate volunteerism in the school district. We need to expand our thinking first. Why are we paying coaches when we have tons of Division I athletic talent that would coach for free. Also before and after school art and music instruction could be staffed by volunteers. Movie nights, potlucks, tutoring, even weekend custodial work could be done by volunteers.

I met with a high school principal who's school had a Sunday youth league for early and pre-teens die because of custodial issues. How tragic. Meanwhile while attending the dedication of the new Valley High School there were tons of West Des Moines residents using the pool and other school facilities. Why? Because Valley is more than a high school. It is a community center.

7. Youth Labor Force

Few things in life teach us more important life long lessons than work. Rural kids have an advantage in that they learn this as part of their daily lifestyles, many of them. Children of business people, too, like my daughters who have their own newspaper and have since one was in 3rd grade and the other kindergarten.

Many of our youth would profit from a structured work experience and the opportunity to earn a few dollars cutting grass, washing dishes, etc...would make them feel a contributor to the family, especially with 60% of our

Des Moines students living in poverty. On top of this they would learn valuable life lessons that cannot be simulated in the classroom.

Note: We're not talking about sending them down a coal mine. And how is this any more unreasonable than having them return from athletic competitions at four a.m. or playing video games all day and night?

8. Realign Grades

We need to go back to more traditional grade alignments. Many of our 6th graders are overmatched in middle school. Our 9th graders are failing at staggering levels. By returning to K-6, 7-9, 10-12 we increase many fold the probability of academic and personal success in a district graduating fewer than 50% of the students served as 9th graders four years later.

Capital Campaign

We must address the fiscal accountability of this district and heal the rift created through the local option tax betrayal. So immediately a forensic audit should take place as well as a full accounting for local option tax dollars. Following that, however, a capital campaign is a must. ISU completed a \$400 million campaign in 2000 and has raised more than \$500 million toward an \$800 campaign they announced late last year.

We have more alumni, more students, more potential than they do. But we can not even pass a bond currently. Upon restoring trust and confidence a capital campaign might look like this:

\$400 million for capital improvements - we have nearly 40 buildings in a state of dis-repair. This is unacceptable.

\$250 million for innovative programming such as a School of Fine and Performing Art.

\$150 million to replace the potential for lost federal funds by opting out of No Child Left Behind.

A key to this is not only earmarking funds but protecting them. For example if we say we need \$1,000,000 to fund librarians at our middle schools we spend the \$1,000,000 we raise for that purpose on librarians at our middle schools. It has become a tradition in public education to ask for money for one purpose and than to spend it on another. That's what created the current nightmare associated with the administration of the local option tax dollars.

Prior to passage of the local option tax we were told it would take \$425 million to do everything we wanted but we'd only get \$352 million should the tax pass. So day one, had all revenue projections held we would have come up \$74 million dollars short. So we promised three things - one, we spelled out exactly what we were going to do with the money building by building. Two, we created a must do list and a wish list and named them List A and List B. Then we promised no excessive administration.

As soon as we got the money, however, we spent on things like the Central Kitchen and the North High Football Stadium. Meanwhile teachers are literally teaching from carts and closets in our district and one middle school had to convert its library into a classroom.

We also granted many schools items off their wish list - schools like Greenwood, Hubbell, and Callanan where I attended and my daughter attends while we closed schools, which we promised we wouldn't, and ignored the needs of about 20 from our original list.

Three, we hired an up to \$24 million dollar consultant. Currently the principal officer is paid \$19,000 per month, more than our Superintendent. We still owe him more than \$700,000 in local option tax dollars. Not his company, we owe them millions. We owe him more than \$700,000 personally yet we lack a single written evaluation on his performance as project manager despite his billing us 160 hours monthly. But then we've done a terrible job evaluating our staff and contractors for years. This is one of the reasons I've advocated having staff assigned to the school board solely to conduct policy and performance audits.

While a capital campaign is a ways off we should immediately initiate a joint operation with Polk County School Districts to build momentum to redirect Prairie Meadows profits - 1/3 to property tax relief, which would help school districts in the long run, and 2/3 to fund before and after school programs with the proceeds distributed to area school districts based on the same formula we distribute local option tax dollars to Polk County school districts.

Contact Information

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