

SOLVING THE EDUCATION DILEMMA

By Ron Russo 2/1/2019

Many worthwhile improvements have been made to increase the educational performance of Delaware's students. We have experienced Visions, Races, increased resources, more administrators and support staff. The dilemma is that despite these worthwhile efforts there has been no significant education improvement in over 30 years!

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that from 1999 to 2017 our 8th graders' progress has been flat with two-thirds functionally illiterate in math and reading. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports only 34% are college ready. Recently local colleges reported 53% of entering Delaware freshmen required remediation.

Money isn't the issue. In 2013 NAEP and the U.S. Dept. of Education ranked Delaware 10th in per pupil expenditures. From 1999 to 2017 per pupil spending was up about twice the inflationary rate. In 1998 it was \$7,255/pupil and in 2015 it was \$14,244/pupil. If capital expenditures were included it would have been over \$20,000. In 1998 there were 21 students per administrator. In 2017 there were 13.9 students per administrative staff member. That's a lower ratio than students per teacher (14.7)!

The dilemma was recognized and a solution was proposed in 1995 when Governor Carper, State Superintendent Mike Ferguson, and a business consortium led by the DuPont Company realized that the source of the problem was also a liability to the state's economy. Anyone living or working in Delaware was being adversely affected by fewer jobs, lower property values, higher taxes and crime rates, etc. People were living across the state line to avoid our schools. Previous efforts focused on what teachers were doing in the schools when, in fact, the real problem was the bureaucratic system that controlled the education process or how teachers got the job done. A systemic change was the solution. Bill Manning, former President of the Red Clay School Board, once described the existing bureaucratic education system as the "Blob" that needed to be pitched.

The systemic solution (suggested by the Brookings Institution) was to have operational decision-making moved from school boards and district bureaucracies and placed in the individual schools led by principals professionally prepared to be the schools' CEOs (Chief Education Officers). Steve Jobs once said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do." Board responsibilities would be reduced to oversight, requested support from schools, and appeals. They would become much less directive and more supportive of schools. Such a shift would make the reduction of the number of school districts, district and state personnel, and related expenses a logical next step.

Mike Ferguson, co-author of the Charter School Law, cited the benefits of this policy change in an overview he wrote about the charter law: "...empower local communities to try new, unique solutions to problems that are facing their own schools...", "...try new approaches to learning without bureaucratic restrictions.", "Reliance on bureaucratic decisions would be a thing of the past.", "...empower local communities further with additional decision-making authority." "Parents and teachers are less restricted by decisions made at a district or state level..." In business, local control provides better "buy-in" by personnel and produces better results. The business of education deserves nothing less.

Charter schools were to model, hone, and share the local control solution and its implementation with traditional schools. It never happened. All the original supporters are gone (Governor, Superintendent, business leaders) and the system that was to be changed took control of the change agent (charters).

We need to begin by passing BOLD legislation to empower qualified school personnel to do the jobs they were hired to do. Once schools are improved, districts reduced, oversight in place, we'll work on real parental choice.