

We must produce the schools Minneapolis needs

Written by Bernadeia H. Johnson, Ed.D.
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Our world has been changing at a pace that most of us struggle to comprehend. It is full of products and services that simply did not exist a few years ago. We now engage one another through video calls and instant messages and social media. We shop from our laptop and bank through our smart phone. We expect the information we want to be available when we want it.

New companies like Google or Amazon have become our engines of economic growth and old ones have overhauled themselves or become obsolete. Minnesota companies like Target and 3M are thoroughly focused on innovation and unafraid of change.

The one constant through all of this has been the increasing value of education. We cannot predict how technology will change our world, but we can predict that those who can learn and adapt will be best positioned to succeed.

And that needs to be the promise of education today – preparing our students to succeed in a fast-changing, unpredictable world.

Minneapolis Public Schools has to make sure that our students – all of them – are prepared to succeed; that they have the knowledge and skills they need to be ready for college or careers after high school as well as the cultural understanding that will make them great neighbors and citizens.

By the standard of many urban school systems, Minneapolis does pretty well. But, for too many students and their families, we are not doing well enough. Too many students, particularly those of color, either drop out before graduation or graduate unready for life in today's knowledge economy.

Just like companies that must change to survive, Minneapolis Public Schools must also change to produce the results that the community needs. We are transforming education, changing our business model to better serve students and families.

One focus is strengthening the principal pipeline, holding current principals accountable for performance and providing better professional development for principals to help them transition from building managers to instructional leaders. Another focus is implementing a comprehensive teacher evaluation system that recognizes exemplary teachers and provides specific professional development opportunities for teachers who need additional support.

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In areas like our Office of New Schools, we are looking differently at how we deliver education to the students who need it most. And those results will pay dividends in a Minneapolis that is richer economically and socially.

The education world is full of promises and, often, soaring rhetoric that is disconnected from reality. Saying we care about the success of all students matters little if too few of them actually succeed. We need, instead, to be judged far more on our results – what we do rather than what we say.

The relatively easy thing to do is produce a more thoughtful educational strategy; we are good at that. It is much harder to change our culture to consistently produce better results for all students. But, working with our teachers and educational leaders, we are trying to do both.

I believe we will ultimately demonstrate results – not just rhetoric – if we concentrate on four big things:

Clarity of Purpose. Our goal is to make sure all students stay with us through graduation and leave us with the knowledge and skills to be ready for college or careers. This means high standards for all, not just some. If our students succeed *after* they leave Minneapolis Public Schools, we succeeded.

Great Teaching. We have a strong teaching force that needs to get stronger. With our teachers, we have developed an evaluation system that is becoming a national model. We must ensure that we support teachers with the additional training and professional development that makes them stronger. Every child, regardless of where he or she attends school in the city, must have great teachers.

Good Choices. Minneapolis has a long history of providing families with choices in the schools their children attend, and we must make sure they have only good choices. We are focusing instruction for consistency throughout the city looking for proven models, including district and charter schools, that make sense for Minneapolis.

Strong Partnerships. As the leader of the Gates-funded District-Charter Compact, we embrace the work of high performing charter schools that are getting results for students, particularly black and brown students. Standout charter programs like Hiawatha Leadership Academies and Mastery School play a vital role in our work. Their performance is our potential.

We are proud to work closely with successful charter schools, whether we are learning from their classroom models, collaborating on next-generation programs or providing facilities for student learning. Recently, our Board of Education voted to sell our closed Northrop School building to Hiawatha Leadership Academies, in line with our commitment to work with and learn from schools that are generating strong results for students of color.

Our aim is to reinvent the school district, adding what it takes to accelerate student achievement and discarding functions that do not. A big part of my role will be to ensure our central office provides the support our schools need. Finally, I know that I cannot succeed without listening

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carefully to the needs of schools, students and their parents.

We have to do things right to get the results we care about. But we cannot wait for things to be perfect to act. The world will not wait, and the urgency for our students occurs now, not later.

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