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Contract with the Community: Improve student outcomes

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A special project by Contributor John Guevara, with Managing Editor Shane Nicholson

In February, we introduced our “Contract with the Community,” a 10 item list of simple reforms and ideas intended to bring about a more open, honest and transparent government. Over the coming weeks, we will explore in-depth each of those 10 items. This week, we look at No. 8, “Improve student outcomes.”

We hear it every election season: in some way shape or form, candidates talk about education.

From the infamous Bush-ism, “Is our children learning?” to Obama’s, “Here in America, you write your own destiny. You make your own future,” education remains a staple political issue.

During the 2016 campaign, Robert Pondiscio wrote for U.S. News and World Report about a new public opinion poll that showed “support for reform staples like charter schools, testing and accountability, merit pay for teachers, and tax credits to fund scholarships for low-income children.”

At the local level, two Rockford school district teachers, Bill Rose and Jonathan Loggerman, were elected to the City Council and take their new seats Monday.

If a silver bullet issue exists in politics, it is education. Improving education increases income by improving workforce skills, and it reduces crime and the rate of teenage pregnancies.

Liberals embracing the position of teachers’ unions clamor for higher pay and big benefits. Some, like former Secretary of State and Democratic candidate for President Hillary Clinton, embrace charter schools.

Scandinavian countries like Finland are touted for their academic rankings over the United States and for paying teachers considerably more. In a 2011 article titled “Why are Finland’s Schools Successful?” Lynell Hancock points out that Finnish teachers have a “Whatever it takes attitude,” and that they are selected from the “top 10 percent” of the nation’s graduates – and are required to earn Master’s degrees in education.

Conservatives call for more local control over wage increases beyond cost of living increases, and benefits packages similar to those available to taxpayers.

Neal McCluskey writes about the Andrew Coulson documentary School Inc. in an article, “Want Better Education? Try School Inc.” for the Cato Institute. In it, he notes how the documentary uncovers the effect of profit motive on educational attainment in countries that also outrank the U.S., like South Korea.

“Freedom, including the ability to make a profit, is crucial to having an education system that works well for children right now, and achieves dynamic, continuous improvement. That is the conclusion Andrew Coulson reached in his studies of education through time and space, and it is what he makes clear in ‘School Inc.’”

Further critics has called for a reduction in administrative and bureaucratic costs in school systems. In a report in this week’s issue of The Times the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), a Chicago-based non-profit group of business and civic leaders, shows that Illinois spends more than \$1 billion on administrative costs across its more than 850 school districts.

The report highlights more than 200 districts in the state serving only a single school. Calls for consolidation in the number of school districts have led to nearly 15 percent decrease in the total across the state since the early 1980s, but some feel that Illinois should push on further in its fight against bureaucratic bloat in education systems.

“The sheer number of school districts in Illinois makes for system inefficiencies and contributes to the inequity within the state,” the Illinois School Funding Reform Commission wrote in February. “Existing consolidation incentives and initiatives have been underfunded and have often focused on rural school districts rather than consolidating dual school districts into single-unit districts.”

Statewide, education groups are not necessarily hesitant to push for consolidation, but they argue that such maneuvers must be made at the local level and not in the top-down edict from Springfield.

Winnebago County currently supports 14 school district bodies, meaning 14 different administrations to be paid out of taxpayer funds from the various cities and towns.

MPC estimates that statewide, Illinois schools could save more than \$450 million in costs by reaching the national average of administrative spend-per-student of \$210.

Without diving too deep into the costs of RPS 205, should the current statewide administrative expense of \$518 per student cited by MPC hold up, reaching that national average would mean a further \$8.5 million that could be spent in Rockford’s classrooms. And that figure could be on the low side given that the MPC study found districts with a higher percentage of low-income students spent up to \$650 on administrative costs for each pupil.

Additionally this week, we have a chance to review a study by The Hamilton Project, a subgroup of the Brookings Institute, called “Improving Student Outcomes, Restoring America’s Education Potential” and apply the findings to our Contract with the Community.

The study reports that student performance has remained flat since the 1970’s, while expenditures have doubled (in real dollars). We are also spending “\$3000 more per student than other developed countries” in the academic rankings.

The study examines long term goals to fundamentally change the structure of public education for the better and simpler short term strategies that can be implemented in the interim.

Contrary to widely held belief, the study contends that more schools are not the answer. There are things that charter schools like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and the Harlem Children's Zone do well that should be expanded, both in other charter schools and throughout the public system.

Success factors for charter schools include changes to the length of the school day, and even the length of the school year. Some are strict about addressing behavioral issues; others include strong emphasis on math and reading development and tailor public schools and other charters to meet local needs.

The Hamilton Project study suggests that the successful charters should be identified and researched in greater depth to isolate and identify the benefits of each success factor.

The greatest fundamental change the study proposes is in the recruitment and retention of effective teachers: "To make sure the most effective teachers are in the classroom, policymakers could focus on making teacher pay more competitive with pay in other sectors, removing unnecessary barriers to teaching, and aligning compensation practices with the goal of improving student achievement."

The study argues that college GPA, teacher certification programs, and graduate degrees are poor signals of teacher effectiveness. Furthermore, the study criticizes teacher tenure and pension plans as poor mechanisms for retaining the most effective teachers.

The authors suggest changing the current system to attract effective teachers and to measure that effectiveness. Effectiveness can be gauged using "tests that measure the skills children should learn – tests that are not easily corrupted when teacher performance pay is based on them," and through observation studies designed specifically to identify teacher effectiveness.

More immediate short term changes include reducing classroom size; increasing the number of preschools; expanding nutrition options for students; summer school for struggling students; and economic incentives for reading. The last option was deemed more as effective and significantly more affordable than summer school. A surprisingly ineffective measure was technological innovations beyond Internet and standard computer access.

The study provides a path forward. We need to emulate successful charter schools and improve upon the successes of the public school system. We need to reform the way we recruit and retain teachers. And we need to act in the short term by adding preschools, exploring incentives, summer schooling, nutrition options, and reduced classroom size.

If education really is the silver bullet, public officials should seriously consider every option available to improve outcomes. This is all hands on deck time. The needle has scarcely moved in almost half a century and we think that should change.

It is time to put aside partisan blinders, and commit to policies that work. It is time to rise from ideological entrenchments and march hand in hand to pursue a reformation. It is time for Lazarus to come forth. It is time for a permanent revolution. Are you in?