

Schools can't go on operating the way they do

By Ronald Russo

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It is apparent from recent newspaper articles that various groups and individuals have differences of opinion on how to improve public schools. The good news is they share the same common goal – to provide every Delaware student with the best possible education.

If you accept the frequently stated premises that, “One size doesn’t fit all” and “You can’t take a cookie-cutter approach to education,” then the presence of multiple solutions is understandable and not necessarily adversarial. It should provide fertile ground for intense conversations.

The various proposals tend to be attractive and possibly successful for segments of the education market. These alternatives include such things as charter schools, vouchers, educational savings accounts, and increased funding. The state’s goal is more inclusive, and therefore, more challenging – every student is to receive the best possible education.

Some alternatives are relatively simple but their effectiveness is questionable.

Increased funding is one suggestion often heard as a possible solution, but the data doesn’t support it. The CATO Institute cites the fact that while per pupil funding has tripled over the last 40 years, student performance has remained stagnant or declined slightly. The real issue is resource allocation and not so much the total amount of funding. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 52 percent of public education expenditures are spent on instruction. The Heritage Foundation recommended state policymakers should implement systemic education reforms that improve resource allocation and encourage effective school leadership.

The recent targeting of six low-performing schools by the Delaware Department of Education shows a movement in the right direction, but the effort needs some work. Implementing systemic change will include revisions to the roles of district and state personnel as well as boards of education. They must become more supportive of local school administrators and less directive. We can’t keep operating our education system in the future as we have in the past and expect significant improvement. Albert Einstein had a term to describe that type of expectation. How

useful would computers be today if they still operated on vacuum tubes instead of microchips? And, by the way, do we really need 19 school districts?

It was nice to see the possible salaries for the new principals of these six schools, but is that necessary or counterproductive? People who aspire to large salaries don't select education as a career. Our principals must have expertise, passion, creativity, and enjoy a challenge. Each principal will have the responsibility of significantly improving his/her school's performance but that can't be done alone. The professional educators in the classroom will be a major factor. Students may arrive with non-education issues (poverty, crime, bad environment, etc.). Those are the cards the school was dealt. It will be up to the educational team (administrators, teachers, parents, etc.) to decide how to play the hand.

Part of the additional funding and large administrative salary could be used to create a schoolwide (administrators, teachers, counselors, secretaries, cafeteria and custodial workers) bonus system to support a team effort. At the end of the school year, district or state boards could evaluate the performance of each school (test scores, graduation rates, discipline records, etc.) and award a percentage of base pay to be used to calculate bonuses. Bonuses would only be awarded if operating funds were available. If the school was too frugal and student performance dropped, bonuses would be reduced or eliminated. If school spending was wasteful and not efficient, bonus money would not be available (simple checks and balances). Since everyone is eligible for the bonus, everyone has an incentive to participate in establishing a culture of success measured by the school's performance.

Let the conversations begin!