

Stop and think

The more that is learned about the Jefferson County school board's decision to terminate Sheldon Berman as superintendent and hire a new leader for the 95,000-student district, the clearer it is that the board must not be left solely to its own devices.

The dismissal of Dr. Berman was marked by duplicity and secrecy. Two of the board members who voted against renewing his contract ran in contested elections this fall and did not tell voters of their intention to take such drastic action. The 5-2 vote late last month against Dr. Berman was preceded by a secret evaluation session that resembled a kangaroo court — notification that his contract would not be extended without presenting Dr. Berman with specific concerns or an opportunity to defend his record.

Perhaps even worse, the divided board seems to have no coherent strategy for how to proceed. It has not defined the type of person it seeks for the job; it has not set measurable and realistic goals and time-tables for what it expects a new superintendent to achieve; it has not even decided whether to conduct a national search outside the

leadership skills. Indeed, it might make it easier to confront areas in need of improvement, and there are concrete steps that could be taken to address them. These include:

► **Creating a position of chief operating officer.** Such a person would deal with operational issues where Dr. Berman's performance has been criticized, often justifiably. These include internal and external communications, overseeing the details of bus routes and nurturing a collegial and cooperative atmosphere in the district's administrative center. It would also allow Dr. Berman to direct more of his energies to the areas in which he excels: innovative curricula and programs; studying and adopting best practices nationally; promoting community engagement in the schools,

sharply, and CARE for Kids and other programs have improved school environments. While much has been made recently of low-performing high schools identified in a flawed and one-dimensional assessment, it's worth noting that five JCPS high schools are included in *Newsweek's* list of the nation's best high schools. How often is any educational venture in Kentucky listed among the country's best?

This record of accomplishment has been achieved while maintaining the district's vitally important 35-year commitment to diversity and equal opportunity — this despite the need, on Dr. Berman's watch, to create a new student assignment plan after a regrettable U.S. Supreme Court decision invalidated a long-standing system that had won community acceptance.

If the school board does not recognize and value the impressive progress that has been made, it runs a grave risk of allowing gains to dissipate.

Time for action

The school board's action in dismissing Dr. Berman was unilateral and unexpected. It was taken by a board that acted in disregard of the support Dr. Berman has had among business and many political leaders, and in the absence of any public consensus that such a radical step was necessary.

To be sure, there is a small but noisy contin-

gent of parents, much of it in affluent eastern Jefferson County, that objects to transporting students beyond "neighbor-



The VanHoose building, headquarters of the Jefferson County Public Schools.

and attracting favorable attention and foundation funding for the district.

► **Using a consult**

ing for or where it is looking.

This is a recipe for disaster. If community constituencies with a high stake in educational achievement — particularly leaders in the business community — remain on the sidelines, there is substantial danger that important gains in recent years will be lost and that the situation in the public schools will actually get worse, and very possibly much worse.

Revisit the decision

The first step that should be taken is for the board to reopen the discussion. There should be a full and public airing of issues that the board majority felt justified a step of such critical importance. Dr. Berman and his staff should be given a chance to respond to those concerns. Community, business and perhaps political leaders should have an opportunity to share their views. It must be determined that board members' positions are based solely on a desire to do what is best for the district and its children, and that no vote is swayed by personal or political grudges.

One option — one that should receive serious consideration — is to change direction and offer Dr. Berman a new contract. Unless the board can offer a far stronger case for a change at the top than it has to date, it makes more sense to build on Dr. Berman's record of significant achievement — while addressing areas of problems and challenges — than to strike out blindly without a compass.

Such a step is doable. It does not require unscrambling eggs.

If two board members change their votes, the 5-2 vote for dismissal becomes a 4-3 vote for retention.

Reversing course would not necessitate ignoring problems in the school district or shortcomings in Dr. Berman's

consultants who work with executives and directors of private businesses. In particular, such a consultant could help the superintendent and board work together to devise a strategic plan for the district. This would contain realistic goals and deadlines, for which the superintendent and the board could be held accountable. Without such a framework of shared objectives, conflict between the board and superintendent is virtually inevitable. Working together, moreover, the board and superintendent might be able to refine some aspects of the student assignment system, such as the busing of the youngest pupils.

Even if it proves impossible or undesirable to keep Dr. Berman, these steps still are worthy of consideration. But, again, the arguments for retaining Dr. Berman — with appropriate adjustments — are compelling.

Record of progress

The sudden decision to oust Dr. Berman gives the impression — to parents, to students, to teachers and to prospective employers who might move to Louisville — that Jefferson County's public schools are stagnating or in decline. That is quite simply not the case.

Jefferson County students outscore averages of large-city districts in reading and math. Exciting initiatives have created new and more rigorous course offerings, two-thirds of high school graduates in 2009 went on to college, percentages of students testing proficient in basic academic skills have risen steadily while students rated novice have dropped

to run a school district — especially since there have been few protests about busing African-American youngsters. And in any case, there will be widespread busing of students in an urban district under any arrangement, since many local schools can't accommodate the numbers of children who live nearby.

The most important point about the transportation plan, however, is that in the current climate, it is extremely unlikely that the board will insist upon and find a candidate with Dr. Berman's commitment to diversity.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, along with access to valuable expertise, will be jeopardized by what foundations will see as a capricious rejection of a superintendent they respect as an educator of national stature. Indeed, the NoVo Foundation has already informed the board that JCPS is being dropped from consideration for a program. Other notifications are sure to follow.

In addition, this unnecessary and divisive disruption comes at a time when Louisville should be united in fighting for local school control against the politically motivated efforts of Sens. David Williams and Dan Seum to allow Frankfort to interfere in school assignment policy.

The business community, in particular, and the incoming Fischer administration, which has emphasized jobs creation, should fear the chilling effect on employer recruitment of the appearance of a school district in disarray. The advantages of being able to tout a district that has had consistently high parental approval ratings and an uncommonly strong market share of 80 percent could be lost quickly.

This is not the time for passivity. This is the time to stand strong for continued educational progress and to intensify the quest for excellence.

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