

Fixing a mistake

January 29, 2011

Jefferson County school board member Linda Duncan showed leadership and courage when she announced this week that she will ask the board at its Feb. 14 meeting to reconsider its decision not to renew Superintendent Sheldon Berman's contract.

At a minimum, this creates time and a forum for much broader contributions on the issue from educators, parents and business and political leaders than was allowed by the November coup — a secret performance evaluation followed by a vote on short notice — that resulted in Mr. Berman's ouster. That action followed an election campaign in which the two winning candidates with opposition — Debbie Wesslund and Diane Porter — did not reveal their intention to replace the superintendent.

Mr. Berman, a staunch backer of integrated schools and a nationally acclaimed educator who has initiated important reforms, has the support of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, the NAACP, the president of Greater Louisville Inc., the chairman of Business Leaders for Education and several members of the county's legislative delegation. Mr. Berman himself had no opportunity to address board members' concerns before the vote.

The board majority's rationale for making the change has been vague, and it has no coherent plan that would instill confidence

that it can hire a top-notch replacement for Mr. Berman by July 1.

The arithmetic is simple enough. The board voted 5-2 to fire Mr. Berman, so two members must switch their positions to reverse a bad decision. Board member Larry Hujo says his mind is open. It might be possible to persuade another member — perhaps Ms. Porter, whose opposition to Mr. Berman seems to run particularly afoul of her constituents' wishes — to change.

But there is an alternative. A reasonable assumption is that the board majority fears looking foolish if it steps back from its decision. Its members should not feel that way. Sometimes an organization, any organization, acts in haste and makes a move that, even if well-intentioned, is an error. It is far more responsible — and far more worthy of respect — to recognize and correct a mistake.

In this case, reopening the question of Mr. Berman's contract — especially if inspired by members like Ms. Wesslund who led the

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effort to end his tenure — would show realization that the board had acted hastily in a politically charged environment with too little input from major stakeholders. It would emphasize the importance of protecting and building upon important progress that has been made. It would demonstrate a desire to close gaps within the board, between the board and the district's administration, and between the board and much of the community.

It would be, in short, far better than the perilous alternative.

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