

Williams vs. JCPS

Kentucky Senate President David Williams' willingness to meddle in the Jefferson County schools, with bad ideas that serve only his own political interests, apparently knows no boundaries.

During the legislative session earlier this year, he sponsored legislation that was designed to ensure that students could go to the schools nearest their homes. That would have undone years of effort to remove vestiges of racial segregation in Louisville schools. It also would have been impossible, since some schools cannot accommodate all the students who live nearby.

But those considerations didn't matter to Sen. Williams, who is the Republican candidate for governor. Nor, in all likelihood, did it bother him that the bill was unsuccessful. He had managed to play the race card in the state's largest county.

Now, he has unburdened himself of another singularly awful proposal: He plans to offer legislation next year that would dissolve the elected Jefferson County Board of Education and allow the mayor to appoint a superintendent (subject to ratification by the Metro Council) and run the school district.

That would produce one of two results, both of them distressing. Either a board elected to focus on the schools would be replaced by supervisors appointed by a mayor whose platform rested primarily on issues having little or nothing to do with education. Or mayoral campaigns would become contests in which candidates would make outlandish promises, and inevitably engage in demagoguery, about the school system.

The handful of cities that put the schools under their mayors — such as New York and Chicago — fare no better than cities with school boards and have their own share of messes.

Sen. Williams' argument rests on an outrageous premise — that Jefferson County schools, which have some of the lowest-performing schools in the state, hold Kentucky back. Of course, the county also has some of the state's best schools. And if the senator wants Louisville's schools to be even better, he could propose that Frankfort send back to the city as much money as it funnels to state government. That's unlikely.

What this really seems all about is a chance to engage in some partisan union-bashing. Sen. Williams asserts that the board "is under the control of the teachers union." That's preposterous. The Jefferson County Teachers Association strongly supported Superintendent Sheldon Berman, and the board dismissed him anyway. Moreover, the JCTA made key concessions in helping Mr. Berman address the challenges of low-performing schools.

Finally, it doesn't take a cynic to suspect that Sen. Williams is again exploiting racial divisions. After all, he is proposing a system that could lead to scrapping the student assignment plan — if a mayor were elected who opposes it. (In your nightmares, imagine *that* campaign.)

Sen. Williams isn't making a strong case for change in how Jefferson County's schools are administered. He is showing why he's unsuited to be governor.