



COMMUNITY

"If your culture doesn't like geeks, you are in for a rough ride."

BILL GATES, MULTIBILLIONAIRE AND MICROSOFT CO-FOUNDER.

Today is Geek Pride Day, observed on this date to commemorate the 1977 release of Star Wars.

EDITORIALS

JCPS must embrace change

The scathing audit of Jefferson County Public Schools that found a bloated bureaucracy of highly compensated administrators will no doubt become fodder for people who don't like public education and somehow want it to go away.



Hargens

That would be a shame.

It would also be a mistaken conclusion of the report last week from state Auditor Adam Edelen.

The intent is to bolster public education, giving Louisville a new opportunity to make the state's largest school system a model of efficiency.

He notes that the audit was requested by Superintendent Donna Hargens and the JCPS board. The results now give them a road map for restoring public confidence and wrestling with a problem that district officials have only barely begun to fix: The oversized bureaucracy, which Mr. Edelen said was allowed to inflate over many years, is preventing tens of millions of dollars in resources from getting to those who need it most — the district's 100,000 students.

The 260-page report contained 45 findings including this whopper: The district pays 369 administrators more than \$100,000 a year.

Compared to five school districts chosen because of their similar budgets, challenges and desires to be high achievers, the report found JCPS ranked unfavorably in the areas of instructional spending, lowest percentage of teachers as staff and highest in administrative spending.

The audit also found the district's school board is generally in the dark about the details of JCPS' \$1.2 billion annual budget. It concluded the seven-member board was too small, and recommended adding two at-large members less likely to fall victim to a my-district-first parochial mindset. That suggestion deserves full consideration.

Nobody likes being audited, but Ms. Hargens and some board members rightly recognized the findings can drive improvement.

"Your recommendations will better our operations and help us achieve our goal of becoming the best urban school district in the nation," Ms. Hargens said.

Unfortunately some board members responded defensively.

Longtime board member Carol Ann Haddad cynically called the the findings "a political thing" for Mr. Edelen. "He's based this all on running for governor, and I think that's terrible."

Election year

» Four JCPS board seats are up for election.

» Information on how to file is at the Jefferson County Elections Center, 810 Barret Ave. or online at <http://elections.jeffersoncounty-clerk.org/>

» Filing deadline is Aug. 12, 4 p.m.

Whether he runs for governor doesn't matter; Mr. Edelen was just doing his job. This is the 16th audit of local school systems he has overseen, and we applaud him for focusing his office's resources on public education, which he has described as the largest taxpayer investment in the commonwealth and "the most important function of our government."

So where does the community go from here?

The audit will no doubt spur a robust debate.

What better timing, then, to release the audit during an election year for school board members? Four board slots are open this fall and we hope there is a strong field of knowledgeable, civic-minded candidates running in each district, people who value public education and want to help make it thrive.

As for JCPS, Ms. Hargens said she's already reduced central office staff and frozen central office positions and will use the report for "continuous improvement." That's a start.

But as officials prepare their written response to the audit over the next 60 days, the superintendent and her board need to clearly demonstrate they understand the status quo is unacceptable. They need to go finding-by-finding, recommendation-by-recommendation, laying out specific goals with timetables for achieving them.

If they disagree with portions of the audit, they need to explain why and offer alternatives.

Beyond that, they can take a lesson from the Metropolitan Sewer District whose failings were detailed in a December 2011 state audit.

MSD launched year-long processes with regular public updates in which it responded to and acted upon a laundry list of findings and recommendations, using them to remake the agency.

There are big differences in what prompted the MSD and JCPS audits. No real corruption or significant waste, fraud or abuse was found at JCPS, unlike shady dealings uncovered at MSD. And the MSD board is appointed, not elected.

But the point is, MSD fully embraced its negative audit as a catalyst for long-term improvement.

JCPS needs to do the same. Our students, our future, depend on that happening.