

Audit will help guide JCPS

By Adam Edelen

Special to The Courier-Journal

As Kentucky's taxpayer watchdog, it's my job to evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency and integrity with which public dollars are administered. Our just completed performance review of the central administration of the Jefferson County Public



Edelen

Schools represents something truly historic — the largest audit ever performed by the Kentucky Auditor of Public Accounts.

With an annual budget of \$1.2 billion, JCPS is Kentucky's second-largest individual government, twice the size of Louisville Metro. With nearly 100,000 students, one in seven Kentucky kids is enrolled in JCPS.

The destinies of JCPS and the commonwealth are inextricably bound. In an era in which needs are increasing yet resources are diminishing, when back-to-school lists read like an inventory of janitorial supplies, when teachers are spending money from their pocketbooks to buy materials for our kids, we have an obligation to ensure that resources are getting to the classroom rather than being consumed by ever-increasing educational bureaucracies.

It is in that vein that we partnered with Superintendent Donna Hargens and the school board to conduct a comprehensive review of the financial and administrative management of JCPS. We know of no other district in America that has invited this level of scrutiny from an independent taxpayer watchdog.

It takes real courage to invite a review from a state auditor's office that has been aggressive in ferreting out

abuses in our schools, most recently sending a former Northern Kentucky superintendent to federal prison for his misdeeds.

The courage to do so has resulted in a roadmap for reform, an inventory of strengths and weaknesses, challenges and opportunities. The report is crucial to realizing Dr. Hargens' vision of JCPS as the best-run school system in America.

There does exist a strong foundation on which to build that vision. The degree to which Louisvillians identify with their schools demonstrates a real pride in public education. JCPS teachers are well paid compared to benchmark districts nationally. Our auditors found no evidence of a culture of corruption in the central office.

But the challenges are enormous.

With the help of former Kentucky Education Commissioner and nationally recognized education expert Gene Wilhoit, we established five districts as comparative benchmarks. The comparisons weren't always flattering.

» With only 53 percent of every education dollar used for student instruction, JCPS ranks lowest among our benchmarks.

» Fully 31 percent of every education dollar is spent in administrative and operations, ranking JCPS highest among our benchmarks.

» Teachers represent 43 percent of total JCPS staff, significantly lower than all of our benchmarks.

» There are 369 administrators within JCPS making more than \$100,000 annually. For comparison's sake, the whole of the executive branch of state government, with twice the employees, has 281 similarly salaried employees.

The use of an expensive and inefficient warehousing system may be the best illustration of the need to modernize JCPS. JCPS operates

six warehouses at an annual cost of more than \$3 million.

Not all the problems are of the district's own making. The shameful state of JCPS' textbook program compared to its benchmarks lies squarely at the feet of a state government that is unable or unwilling to adequately fund education.

Regrettably, the current structure and culture of the elected school board is insufficient to provide meaningful oversight. Astoundingly, there is no board review of such basics as budget-to-actual comparisons. As a result, we've recommended expanding the board by two at-large members, whose focus would be more district-wide than the current district-based approach.

The expanded watchdog role also would enable the board to better demand improvement in a number of areas where we detected lax oversight, ranging from contracting and travel to the use of take-home vehicles and cellphones. Particular attention is also necessary in the area of student safety; from having more actionable emergency plans in place to protecting the privacy of students and employees in the digital age.

The mission of this effort was to neither condemn nor cheerlead. Our effort focused on presenting the facts and providing a candid assessment of the internal operation of this critically important public school system.

The leadership of the JCPS demonstrated real courage in requesting this roadmap for reform. They will need more of that courage — and the galvanized support of the entire community — in the effort to make JCPS the best-run public school system in America.

So much depends upon their success.

Adam H. Edelen is Kentucky's auditor of public accounts.