

Your Turn

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Guest Columnists

Group lists how to reboot JCPS

The state education commissioner will soon release the audit of JCPS and provide Louisville with the most comprehensive examination of our school district yet. When released, the results will help us understand the challenges that face JCPS and how we can ensure our district better serves all students. In the meantime, the audit has already sparked one significant outcome — our community is talking about the importance of high quality public education, a conversation that is long overdue.

To better understand how communities have overcome the challenges that face large urban school districts, a group of business and civic leaders passionate about quality public education recently engaged Bellwether Education Partners, a national nonprofit focused on changing the education and life outcomes of underserved children, to advise on what forms of state intervention have been successful elsewhere.

Based on the examples of improving urban school systems included in the Bellwether Report, it is clear that if JCPS wants to improve, change in its governance structure is essential. Most large urban districts that have improved student outcomes following state intervention have utilized an “empowered executive” model of leadership. In this model the person with the authority of a superintendent has increased power and support to make significant changes in district policy and structure.

Education affects everything

Why are we so concerned about improving outcomes at JCPS? Because education affects everything. High-performing public schools make our community more prosperous, our citizens safer and our students more prepared for success upon graduation. If we are worried about the homicide rate, we should improve public education. If we are worried about the opioid epidemic, we should improve public education. If we are worried about the cost of health and social services, we should improve public education.

JCPS is failing our kids

The facts are indisputable — and unacceptable.

- JCPS proficiency rates on state assessments lag other districts in most grades and in most subjects.

- Less than half of our elementary and middle school students score at or above proficient in reading, math and writing.

- In some grades and subjects, the performance gap between black students and white students is more than 30 percentage points. In the past five years, the gap has continued to widen.

- Only 63 percent of JCPS four-year graduates are college or career ready.

- Of those JCPS graduates, only 45 percent of our African-American students are college or career ready, compared to 75 percent of their white classmates.

- Only 57 percent of JCPS graduates enroll in post-secondary education (2- or 4-year institutions) in the fall immediately following high school graduation.

These results are disappointing, and ultimately, indicative of a broken system. While that system is failing our kids, we recognize the value that many teachers and administrators bring every day.

There are many success stories in JCPS. Thousands of our students can compete with the best students in the nation. We support the thousands of smart, passionate and well-intentioned administrators and teachers in JCPS. That doesn't change the fact that this performance is unacceptable and the system is broken.

How do we improve school system?

As a unit of state government, JCPS is guided by many state laws and regulations designed for and working well in Kentucky's average school district — which is small and rural. However, that structure actually creates barriers to change when addressing the complexities of a large urban district like ours. To put JCPS on the path to marked improvement as shown by other large urban districts, we need a temporary governance and management model that allows for a systemwide reset, eliminating barriers that stand in the way of student achievement.

The expectation is that following the JCPS audit, the commissioner of education will employ some kind of short-term management change to address some of our fundamental problems. We should welcome that help with open arms. We should work to ensure that state intervention provides the opportunity to make the resource shifts necessary to create real improvement in our classrooms.

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