

SCALA should diversify, include JCPS stakeholders in discussions

Your Turn

Brent McKim

Guest columnist

There has been considerable community conversation about the efforts of an elite group of influential Louisvillians organized by David Jones Sr., called the Steering Committee for Action on Louisville's Agenda (SCALA). One of SCALA's top priorities is to change the future and the structure of the Jefferson County Public Schools.

Many in our community have expressed significant concerns with several aspects of how SCALA has operated. The group's membership is closed and highly exclusive. Its operation has not been publicly transparent. The membership of the group has very little diversity and is not reflective of the community.

And even though JCPS is a stated focus for the group, no representatives from the JCPS administration, elected school board, teachers association, or parent and other knowledgeable stakeholder organizations have been allowed to participate in SCALA discussions. In other words, it seems that by intentional design, the members of SCALA have limited information and understanding of the realities of JCPS operations.

Adding to community concerns is a SCALA-funded report by a conservative advocacy group described in local news reports as "one of the groups 'increasingly funded by a handful of conservative billionaires and for-profit education companies — often without proper disclosure ...(that) push state-level education legislation that makes way for greater private profiteering — while leaving traditional public schools further behind.'"

One of the predictable assertions in this report is that the labor agreement for JCPS teachers is rigid and a barrier to student success. Had the teachers association been included in SCALA meetings, we could have corrected that misunderstanding. Our labor agreement actually has remarkable flexibility built into it by design. For example, every school site can modify the agreement to meet student needs by way of a site-based contract deviation. Contract devi-

ations occur in schools all over Jefferson County every year.

Ironically, the flexibility in our current teacher contract was described well by then JCPS school board member David Jones Jr. In 2013, when our current contract was approved by Mr. Jones and the other members of the school board, Mr. Jones issued a public statement saying, "My vote is in favor of the agreement, which I consider a substantial improvement for students and taxpayers alike, and a harbinger of a new era of labor-management flexibility in delivering instruction for our students. Especially for students who struggle in our current system, modernization of work rules and funding for extended hours offers great promise. Most important to me, the new agreement gives school and district leaders the authority to create environments where teachers can do their best work — and removes from JCPS the excuse of an overly rigid union contract as an explanation for failure."

Teachers' working conditions are also students' learning conditions. So it makes sense that students are more successful when their teachers have a collectively bargained labor agreement. Research by Nelson, Rosen, and Powell found that student success was greater in school districts with collective bargaining contracts because, "Through negotiations, unionized teachers have more leverage over conditions that impact school performance such as class size, academic resources, teacher training, academic and social support services than non-union educators. ..."

The Jefferson County Teachers Association appreciates the commitment by SCALA members to improving outcomes for our community's students. And we agree that the status quo is not good enough. Therefore, we urge the SCALA members to adopt the much more transparent and inclusive approach taken by their counterparts in Nashville. This would allow SCALA members to engage more constructively, collaboratively and effectively with other stakeholders in our community.

We can all accomplish more when we work together.

Brent McKim is president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association.