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Lessons to be learned from plan for Cleveland schools

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Gov. John Kasich traveled to Cleveland Monday to sign a law designed to transform the troubled Cleveland City School System. But the governor's presence wasn't just about one school district.

As he said at the signing, "Cleveland is now leading the way in school reform. Why shouldn't I fight to make sure that every kid has the same opportunity that I had?"

Why, indeed.

The state's urban school districts are in trouble, both financially and academically, and none is more indicative of this fact than the Youngstown system, which is under state-mandated academic watch, and recently emerged from state-declared fiscal emergency.

A state academic distress commission has been working with all the interest groups, including Superintendent Connie Hathorn and his staff, to develop a recovery plan.

The state's superintendent of public instruction, Stan Heffner, has signed off on the blueprint that provides a path to academic recovery, but given that the district has a year to show improvement, it can use all the help it can get.

Heffner has made it clear that he expects the Youngstown district to achieve a continuous improvement designation in the state report card or the state will intervene.

Given that possibility, Hathorn and members of the school board would do well to study the Cleveland Plan For Transforming Schools. There are elements that could be applied to Youngstown and to any other urban school district.

For example, the law requires parents of district students to attend at least one meeting at the school by Dec. 15 of each year so they can meet teachers and discuss expectations and their children's performance, according to the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

This may appear to be a no-brainer for suburbanites, but for inner city schools, parental participation is a very real problem.

The most controversial element — it was largely responsible for all the political and labor battles that occurred — involves the teachers.

Teachers

The law lets the Cleveland district keep high-performing and specialized teachers during layoffs by making tenure and seniority only secondary factors in deciding who goes and who stays.

In reporting on the governor's signing of the state law designed for Cleveland, Plain Dealer reporter Patrick O'Donnell offered this perspective:

“A year ago, Gov. John Kasich and State Sen. Nina Turner were political enemies.

“The Cleveland Teachers Union rejected the school district’s push to create a merit pay system, agreeing only to study it.

“And Mayor Frank Jackson and Cleveland school leaders went out on a limb and asked state legislators for changes in the seniority rules and pay for teachers, only to be rebuffed.”

But on Monday, all the parties were on hand to witness the launching of the transformation plan.

The moral of the story is that change is never easy, especially when there are so many special interest groups involved, but with the proper leadership and support from people in high places, such as the governor, the impossible is made possible.

The Youngstown City School District is at a crossroads, but what is taking place in Cleveland is cause for some optimism.

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