

An Alternative to Mayoral Takeover: Community Schools

Will the current MPS Takeover debate conclude in a positive way for the students, parents, and teachers of MPS? And for the community at large?

Only if some solution can be reached that enlists the Mayor, and harnesses the enthusiasm of the anti-takeover groups to contribute towards the improvement of the schools in the future.

Why is it so important to reach a compromise with the Mayor?

Because there needs to be a change in culture in MPS, and a change in the knowledge of and understanding about MPS in the whole community. It makes a difference in the way students, teachers, and parents feel about themselves and their young people's future. There needs to be joint leadership and a common sense of purpose that is necessary to address the problems of struggling students, and struggling schools.

What common ground could be found that an

elected school board could offer to the Mayor?

The elected school board could offer the Mayor a central role in supporting and coordinating a new initiative in MPS, “Community Schools.”

What does that entail?

The “Community Schools” movement has been in play for 10 to 15 years. It includes a public school being adopted by one or more strong partners. The schools become community centers that stay open late in the evening. Such schools offer a variety of art, music, and extracurricular activities to the students. Students want to come to school not only because of the additional activities, but also because of a rigorous curriculum, mentoring and volunteering by adults, and a warmer attitude in the schools. There are also GED, parenting, and other activities for adults offered at the “Community School.”

Would the Mayor accept this?

Only one of the goals of the Mayor’s MPS Innovation Council has to do with educational rather than financial issues. And that goal fits in very nicely with “Community Schools.” It is described as follows: “Work in collaboration with a broad base of community stakeholders:

The Council will work with parents, educators, MPS leadership and staff, labor unions, community organizations, the business community, the philanthropic community and all other interested parties. The Council may do so by establishing task forces, subcommittees and other mechanisms for feedback from the community.”

But wouldn't this fall short of the Mayor's argument about the importance of getting 'Race to the Top Funds.'

Although the Mayor doesn't admit it, Mayoral Takeover by itself probably would not provide any competitive edge in the competition for the federal funds. What would be more helpful would be a measure of respect by the Mayor for the competence of the present School Board, and a unity of purpose about how federal funds would be spent in an innovative and results-based way. And while Mayor Barrett often talks about Arne Duncan, he never explains that Arne is passionate about and committed to “Community Schools,” like the ones Arne started and encouraged in Chicago. Mayor Barrett could be the first mayor in the country to work with an elected School Board to use the “Community Schools” method in a comprehensive way to address the problems of the most high risk schools in

the district.

Isn't this unrealistic?

Let's assume that Mayor Barrett really wants to improve the struggling schools, that he has a good heart. Maybe, we should keep telling him that we want him to show leadership and bring us together. If we are persistent, perhaps he will realize that the 20 community groups that are opposed to the takeover are not trying to preserve the "status quo." If he reflects, he will realize that the groups who are opposing the takeover have been working in the trenches for years to improve MPS.

Besides, the Mayor has a unique opportunity to tap the enthusiasm of those opposing the takeover and seize a moment of community concern about the direction of the schools.

We could keep telling him: "Seize the moment, bring us together, parents and teachers, businesses and labor unions, churches and non-profits, colleges and technical schools."

Are there any other ways that the School Board and the Mayor could collaborate?

There are three other major areas of concern in which the Mayor could play an essential role in supporting MPS. **(1) MPS ARTS INITIATIVE:** Each student in MPS should be entitled each semester to Art, Music, Dance, Creative Writing, Sports,

Debate, Forensics, or some other extracurricular activity. This could be achieved by additional funding for such activities as well as more community and volunteer provided activities. GOAL: a new commitment to the “related activities” that give students an identity and a reason to attend school. **(2) MPS MENTORING INITIATIVE:** A new, comprehensive approach to more mentors in the schools: citizens, parents, graduates, and other stakeholders. GOAL: A significant increase in mentors at every level of MPS from elementary to high schools. **(3) INFORMED MPS STAKEHOLDER INITIATIVE:** A collective effort to educate students, parents, stakeholders, and citizens in general, about MPS issues and what makes for success in various school settings. Recognizing achievements by parents, students, teachers, and community stakeholders should be included in this initiative. Included as well should be a discussion with the Journal/Sentinel and other media about the effectiveness of current educational reporting, and ways to reach more people . GOAL: To achieve the best educated community in the country concerning public school issues.

All this sounds like a lot of work.

That is why the Mayor's help and support would be essential, not just helpful.

What is the real difference between this approach as compared with the Mayoral Takeover?

This compromise approach between the School Board and the Mayor, based on the "Community Schools" would be a bottom up rather than a top down approach. It would be a collaborative effort, involving more stakeholders and playing out somewhat differently at different schools. Its success would depend on the willingness of many different individuals and groups to work together and make a long term commitment to MPS, and MPS students.

It sounds like a lot of work. Why not try Mayoral Takeover which sounds a lot easier, just giving the Mayor and one Superintendent the power to make all the key decisions?

"Community Schools," and the coming together of the community that it requires, is what will bring real change.