

EDITORIAL - A new model for schools

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Rather than butt heads with the education establishment in Rhode Island - something that often leaves a reformer with little more than a bad headache - Cumberland Mayor Daniel McKee is attempting an end run. It would be in the public's interest if he got into the end zone.

Instead of trying to reform existing schools, Mr. McKee and a coalition of Rhode Island mayors are hoping to start from scratch. They are pushing for the creation of a regional elementary school serving Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Lincoln and Cumberland, to be overseen by a board of mayors or town managers rather than school committees.

The school, operating like a charter, could be run much more cheaply than Rhode Island's typical public schools, which are both costly and poorly performing, mired in union work rules and contracts that tend to focus spending on superb teacher benefits rather than students' needs.

By starting fresh, Mr. McKee believes, the school could readily institute "best practices" for educating students. With support from private donations as well as state money, the school could end up saving taxpayers money.

It also might serve as a beacon for what can be accomplished in public education using a different model than the hidebound system entrenched in Rhode Island.

That will surely make it controversial, unfortunately, since powerful forces are dead-set against serious reform. Already, Cumberland Schools Supt. Donna Morella has criticized the idea, saying it would take decisions out the hands of school committees and could drain funds from existing public schools.

There is also the thorny problem of trying to get it established as a charter school. The General Assembly, which historically has heeded the powerful teachers-union lobby, has imposed a moratorium on charter schools. That would have to be lifted.

It should be - both for this school and others. Rhode Island, facing deficits of historic proportions and generally mediocre public schools, particularly in minority communities, needs to try some new approaches for the sake of students.

Of course, charter schools comprise only a small portion of the state's public schools. Parents and others who seek better public education must keep applying pressure on local communities to shift priorities more towards students, and away from politically powerful special interests.

Still, the more that such experiments as Mr. McKee's proposed school can be tried, the better. Rhode Island needs to benefit from the best ideas, instead of stubbornly sticking to a system that is poorly serving its students.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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