Seniority Shouldn’t Rule

Performance measures should guide teacher layoffs

Dallas school trustees took an important first step Thursday in tentatively backing a plan to increase the role performance plays in determining whether teachers lose their jobs. Trustees should have gone further in using classroom data to make those calls, but the compromise deserves the board’s approval when a final vote is taken, perhaps in two weeks.

DISD, like many other Texas school districts, is considering layoffs as a way to make up the revenue losses coming because of the state’s budget crisis. Texas’ steep shortfall is forcing legislators to consider substantial cuts to public education funding.

Dallas trustees and Superintendent Michael Hinojosa are wisely trying to get ahead of that likelihood. As part of their planning, trustee Edwin Flores introduced a change Thursday to the criteria the district uses in determining the layoffs of teachers and other contract employees in times of financial emergency or because the superintendent decides a change is needed.

Seniority had effectively ruled the day when the central office made these decisions before. That’s because all teachers look about the same on the district’s appraisal system. According to Flores, about 98 percent of Dallas teachers end up with a “meets” or “exceeds expectations” on evaluations. Since everyone looks all right, the next factor administrators consider is length of service.

Of course, some veteran teachers are exceptional. They apply their experience to help children get past stumbling blocks. But research shows that seniority is not magical. Sometimes it helps, sometimes not.

That’s why Flores wants the district to use other factors. We particularly like that he worked out a compromise with trustee Lew Blackburn to let principals — not district headquarters — make many of the layoff decisions. The district is rightly holding principals more accountable for their campuses, so they should also have more say in who works there.

The performance measures principals would use include considering which teachers rank lowest in a particular area. For example, if a math teacher performs poorly compared with other math teachers, that teacher could be in jeopardy. Likewise, a teacher who has been written up for being belligerent or is absent often could be on the wrong short list.

On the other hand, the standards would include positive contributions, too. If a teacher who’s not doing well by some metrics puts in extra hours tutoring or developing materials, that could count toward retention.

Flores is correct that this approach will give teachers greater clarity about why they lost their jobs. Eventually, the district must include how a teacher’s students did on various tests when making layoff decisions. Testing data shows whether teachers are moving their students ahead. But at least the board is moving away from seniority being the determining factor.
We understand the anger over Superintendent Michael Hinojosa walking away from his hometown Dallas Independent School District, mere months after signing a three-year contract extension.

It's tough not to feel a stinging betrayal from a man who said, "My heart's in Dallas," after he failed to land a similar job in Las Vegas. His heart kept him off the market only long enough for his next opportunity, this one in suburban Atlanta.

But there's another way to view his ugly exit — as an opportunity for Dallas.

DISD now has a chance to hire a reformer in the mold of a Joel Klein. He passionately led New York City's schools for most of the last decade and exemplified the reform movement, whether through closing bad schools, fighting for better teachers or recruiting successful charter school operators.

Hinojosa actually may have laid the groundwork for such a successor by focusing on hiring stronger principals, using data to drive school decisions and trying to link teacher evaluations to student test scores.

What DISD must do now is find a superintendent with Klein's burning fire for change. Los Angeles schools just hired someone like that in John Deasy, who recently told Dallas business leaders and DISD officials that he sees his mission of improving L.A. schools as one of social justice.

So he battles unions to implement a way to better evaluate teachers. And opens the district to more charter schools with proven records of success. And collaborates with his city's mayor to turn around their worst schools.

The key for Dallas is to assertively take the next step. And to do that, its business community must show wiser leadership. That starts with helping find an interim superintendent with strong financial skills to guide DISD through more difficult budget cuts.

It also means recruiting trustees who share a common vision of reform. The agenda must include hiring better principals and teachers and replacing failing ones, insisting on academic rigor and clear performance measures, and collaborating with nonprofits and charters working to improve schools in areas like West Dallas.

Encouragingly, Dallas Regional Chamber members have been examining districts nationwide, including Los Angeles. And several business leaders are launching charter schools and striving to help existing campuses.

Hinojosa will leave frustrated that business leaders did not do more to recruit more and better candidates for this spring's election. Or, rather, non-election. Two of the three school board races had no one willing to challenge foot-dragging incumbents. And the other race, an open seat, drew only a single candidate. The district was able to cancel its election, the unopposed candidates won — and voters lost.

So, yes, while lots of folks are mad at Michael Hinojosa, DISD must move forward. Only a true reformer with real passion, like a Klein or a Deasy, can lead that effort.

And we won't find one unless business leaders and school trustees alike seize the moment and do the right thing for our city, its children and their parents.

Dallas is running out of chances. It can't waste this one.
The Unequal Yoke

Hinojosa, Johnson exits show why voters need to focus more on school trustees, says William McKenzie


Within hours Thursday, North Texas lost two of its most important leaders. The chiefs of our region's largest school districts had taken a new job or resigned.

As expected, the fury and lament are aimed at them. At one level, that's understandable. They're the top figures in their districts. And voters either feel confused or betrayed by their decisions, although, in the case I know best, Hinojosa's, he was a better superintendent than the manner of his exit suggests. Some of his reforms, such as selecting and developing better principals, helped students.

The headlines also overlook an equally big player: school boards. In each case, frustration with school trustees contributed to a superintendent heading out the door.

Until voters pay closer attention to the quality of school board members, this situation will keep playing itself out. And not only in North Texas, but in many places. With exceptions, like the Houston district, superintendents and trustees often are unequally yoked.

A crash course here: Superintendents manage districts. School boards set policy and budgets. When the two sides are in perpetual conflict, districts have no real vision. And that hurts students.

Gene Maeroff, a former New York Times reporter and author of School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy, has documented how trustees are an issue in many communities. A common problem is that trustees don't always share a vision. Members either constantly rotate in and off boards or they focus on their own agendas.

Those were factors in Hinojosa's exit. He was frustrated by trustees not having enough of a shared vision.

That includes on such centerpiece reforms as linking teacher evaluations to the performance of students on various tests. Hinojosa rightly wanted a policy like that for DISD. So did board members like Edwin Flores.

But neither could get enough backers, even though it could have helped the district identify struggling teachers and get them more training or show them the door.

Johnson faced her own conflicts with a few Fort Worth trustees. Some issues sounded personal, but they prompted her to exit stage left.

Yes, there are communities where trustees band together to make a positive impact. Maeroff points to how Denver trustees worked with then-Superintendent Michael Bennet to deal with low-test scores and high dropout rates. And in Houston, the board and Superintendent Terry Grier recently worked together

If school districts don’t begin the work of strengthening their school boards, they will continue to be at risk of losing their superintendents, like Dallas lost Michael Hinojosa and Fort Worth lost Melody Johnson. At least in the case of Hinojosa, a lack of a shared vision between the board members led to his departure.

to pass a policy that will require teacher evaluations be based partly upon a student’s test scores.

But successes like that just don’t happen. They require voters to start paying attention to trustee elections, where turnout is normally abysmally low. They require organizations to start recruiting and training candidates who want to enact policies based upon the best research data. And they require school boards to train their members about the ins-and-outs of being a trustee.

If none of this works, there’s always the possibility of appointed school boards, I’m not there yet. I’d like Dallas to build a stronger elected board. We have sharp players, like Flores, Bernadette Nutall and Mike Morath. Each is knee-deep in DISD issues and the education ideas at play nationally.

But Dallas doesn’t have enough trustees like them. And we aren’t likely to have them in a year or so when Dallas will have another superintendent. It takes time to develop a consensus among trustees. Former Houston trustee Diane Johnson says that her district’s reform-minded board didn’t develop overnight. It took years of work.

But if the work of strengthening a school board never starts, districts will continue to be at risk. That includes here in Dallas. As school board elections go, so goes a district.

Just ask Michael Hinojosa and Melody Johnson.

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ONCE upon a time, the story went, we lived in a broad-
As the 2011 Legislature began, Rep. Eric Johnson, D-Dallas, had dreams of creating a pilot program that would flood participating middle schools with resources to improve them. Grades 6, 7 and 8 are often the last chance to get students back on track so they can graduate from high school and head to college or a good job. Johnson naturally was interested in southern Dallas middle schools, since he represents some of the area.

As the session went on, the freshman’s dreams ran into the state’s fiscal realities, and he had to put aside the idea.

But here’s a new reality: Legislators have included funding in the Texas Education Agency budget that is tailor-made for Johnson’s concept, an idea similar to the successful Harlem Children’s Zone that education reformer Geoffrey Canada pioneered in New York.

Not much money, mind you, but enough to help. So Johnson and Dallas school officials should start preparing a bid and working to match it with local funds.

Here’s what we’re talking about:

Rider 56 in the TEA budget contains about $23.5 million for the next two years for programs targeting “the prevention of academic failure, which may include, but are not limited to, algebra readiness, literacy academies, math academies, professional development, middle grades initiatives and other assistance aimed at improving student performance on state assessments.”

The rider says about $4.5 million of that must go to the Reasoning Mind program. But money clearly is also available for the kind of middle-grade innovations Johnson envisions.

It looks as if there’s money available to “flood” a handful of southern Dallas middle schools with resources such as strong principals, after-school tutors and campus interventionists who work with struggling students. Nor should it cost much to get teachers certified to instruct in core subjects such as math.

Southern Dallas isn’t the only part of our city with lackluster middle schools. And W.E.

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**Far from college ready**

Many middle schoolers are far from college-ready. Below is the percentage of students scoring at TAKS’ college-ready level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pearl C. Anderson Middle Learning Center</th>
<th>13%</th>
<th>8%</th>
<th>17%</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>27%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O.W. Holmes Humanities/Communication Academy</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Earl Dade Middle School</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency, 2009-10 school year

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Greiner Exploratory Arts Academy in Oak Cliff, is a standout middle school. But data from the 2009-10 school year, the latest available, shows that students in southern Dallas middle schools often are far from progressing at a pace that will ultimately prepare them for college. (The accompanying chart highlights trend lines at three campuses, illustrating the range of scores in middle schools in the southern half of our city.)

The TEA money offers a way to alter that trend, and this newspaper urges Johnson to take the lead in getting some of those funds for DISD. He started the session with an excellent idea. Here’s his chance to realize his dream — and to help students in southern Dallas realize theirs as well.
A blueprint for reform
Here's how Rawlings can become Dallas' education mayor, says William McKenzie

Now that Mike Rawlings has won the Dallas mayor's race, and has done so in part on the unusual angle of wanting to improve the city's schools, how exactly does a former top executive at Pizza Hut become Dallas' education mayor?

The answer won’t be simple, especially since there is no real modern tradition of Dallas mayors stepping into the world of education. But even in some places where mayors don’t have super-strong powers, they are stepping into that world. They help create a road map for Rawlings to use as he rightly sets out to improve Dallas' public schools, which matter more to families in our city — and the course Dallas takes — than all the tall buildings, modern bridges and fun sports teams:

Elected new school trustees

As the leader of a weak-mayor city, Rawlings won't have the tools to make his imprint on schools the way strong mayors have stepped in to hire reform-minded superintendents in cities like New York, Washington and Chicago. Still, he can make a huge difference, as Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has done in Los Angeles.

The mayor of LA has more statutory power than the chief executive of Dallas, but less than the heads of strong-mayor cities. Villaraigosa hasn't let that stop him.

After failing to get California legislators to let him take over the city's schools, Villaraigosa did the next most consequential thing: He recruited reformers to run for trustees. And not only did he recruit them, he raised big buckets of money for their campaigns, which you need in LA.

The Los Angeles Unified School District's seven-member board of trustees didn't change overnight. But it did change in a few election cycles. Reformers today control the school board, which resulted in the beleaguered 680,000-student district hiring über-change-agent John Deasy this year to lead the district.

Deasy describes his mission as one of social justice, especially his belief that every student deserves a quality teacher. He's quick to admit that he may fail at meeting that goal, which includes changing how teachers are evaluated, but he sees it as his moral duty to try.

To Rawlings' good fortune, he has a natural opportunity to start working on a slate of trustees right away. The district will host three trustee elections next spring.

Rawlings should start searching now for candidates who share a vision for the Dallas Independent School District. And not just any vision — it must be based on practices that have been proved to work.

The agenda should include:

- A passionate belief in using data to guide school decisions.
- Hiring and developing strong principals.
- Pulling out all the stops to recruit and train quality teachers.
- Using test scores to help evaluate teachers.
- Focusing on middle schools as a way to decrease high school dropout rates.
- Enlisting parents to engage their children academically.
- Expanding school choice through recruiting or expanding proven charter school operators.
- Fighting for equitable funding.
- Holding schools accountable for their successes or failures.

None of this will come easily. Rawlings will face resistance every step of the way, just as Villaraigosa has — and just as reformers in Houston have.

Natasha Kamrani, a former Houston trustee, has the best advice I've heard: You have to get people to run based on an agenda, not because they are your friends. In other words, Rawlings could get all the great people in the world, but that wouldn't matter. What matters is if they share an explicit agenda.

Big progress may not come on Rawlings' watch, either. Elevating a big urban school district takes time. But he can set in motion the kind of change that will result in a district with stronger principals, higher-quality teachers and engaged parents, three of the most crucial fundamentals that students need to make it through school with a shot at college or a decent job.

Step 1 is finding and electing trustees who share a "best-practices" vision.
Engage Dallas' business, philanthropic communities

Dallas has an infrastructure of business, philanthropic, civic, education and religious organizations ready to help Rawlings elevate Dallas' schools. He's heard from parts of this coalition of the willing during his mayoral bid. Now, he needs to engage it.

Here, too, he could look to Los Angeles for guidance. Before Deasy started in LA, David Rattray, a vice president for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, started tilling the soil for a "compact" that would align business, philanthropic, civic, political and labor groups behind the common set of school goals. He based his work on the Boston Compact, which started in the early 1980s and has been updated every several years.

Rattray faced many resisters. And he may have compromised too much to get some organizations to back the LA Compact. But the city now has a phalanx of institutions that have signed onto a mission statement for LA's schools. And they can give cover to trustees who make controversial calls that align with those goals.

Rawlings has talked about creating a common set of goals for Dallas; now's the time to do it. The groundwork has been laid with the Dallas Achieves effort of the last decade. And the city's landscape is filled with organizations that are interested in the city's schools or doing innovative education work.

The Dallas Regional Chamber has a core group that is studying the best practices of other districts, and that group is working on a compact for Dallas. The Teaching Trust is partnering with Southern Methodist University to recruit and develop strong classroom leaders. The Dallas Coalition has an effective program that teaches parents how to advocate for their children. The George W. Bush Institute has a pilot program that DISD is participating in to groom stronger principals, plus a middle school improvement project. The Texas High School Project is working alongside the Communities Foundation of Texas to create stronger high schools in Dallas. And strong charter school networks, like those run by Uplift Education, are eager to expand their work.

Beyond creating a compact, here's another way Rawlings could engage these and other institutions: Create a nonprofit organization to bid to run some of Dallas' most underperforming schools. Villarigosa has done that in LA and brought in innovative, young talent from the school reform movement to oversee that work, which includes 15 schools and oversees about 18,000 students.

This move would rankle traditionalists, but Rawlings has a network to tap into to raise money for a nonprofit that could manage a handful of failing schools and put in place practices that have been shown to elevate schools, such as using real-time data to keep on top of struggling students.

Focus on next superintendent

Rawlings has a perfect opening, with DISD scrambling to find a new superintendent. The chances are that former Superintendent Michael Hinojosa would have liked working with a mayor interested in public schools. He seemed genuinely perturbed that former Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert retreated from his initial efforts in this arena.

But with Hinojosa heading to suburban Atlanta, Rawlings has a blank slate. And by being a player in the search for a superintendent — even outflanking the board and doing some calling around himself, if need be — he can help shape the final call.

I say "help shape" because the current school board doesn't have enough reformers interested in recruiting a John Deasy-like figure. That won't change before the next superintendent is hired.

But Rawlings can increase the chances that Dallas ends up with a leader who buys into enough of the best-practices agenda to help the city's schools. For all the warts around Hinojosa's financial crisis and controversial exit, he launched important reforms, such as recruiting stronger principals and using data to drive decisions. That foundation will help Rawlings make the case to interested leaders.

Rawlings particular has a shot if he succeeds in engaging the business and philanthropic communities. They have enough people who understand the type of change needed.

If Rawlings and those communities can signal to the next superintendent that they will stand behind him or her, they could make this an enticing place to come. And that help is on the way in terms of possible new school trustees.

Any serious reformer will want to know that he or she has a shot. One of the reasons Hinojosa left was that he constantly had to fight for enough votes to pass some of his big reforms, like linking teacher evaluations to student performance in the classroom. Houston just got that crucial part of improving teacher quality passed, but only after reformers across the city got involved and helped elect a school board that understood its importance.

The bottom line? Getting even a moderate reformer to come here will require outside support. But Rawlings has been given an opening.

And not just on finding a new superintendent, but on becoming Dallas' first real education mayor. Seize the moment, Mr. Mayor.

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A blueprint for reform

Heres how Rawlings can become Dallas education mayor, says
William McKenzie

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Rethinking urban schools
There is no magic bullet, says William McKenzie, but there are examples from across the nation that DISD should follow.

Can big urban school districts succeed?
The subject is timely, with public schools starting tomorrow in Dallas and around Texas. And because Dallas school trustees are starting the process of selecting a new superintendent to replace Michael Hinojosa, the question has special urgency for Dallas ISD.

There is no magic bullet when it comes to education reform.

But the answer is that, yes, big urban districts can succeed. Several around the country have shown how to apply strategies to help their kids learn at grade level and beyond, and they offer examples for DISD to carefully consider.

The place to start is for districts to embrace innovation.
By innovation, I mean creative practices supported by research.
There are several ways to go about this. In Denver, the district has an office of innovation that oversees efforts by local schools to reshape their work. After interviewing school leaders there this summer, what I found most effective is the collaborative nature of Denver’s approach.
At campuses that want to become an “innovation school,” teachers, principals, parents and administrators work on a plan that incorporates best practices from other places. For example, one Denver school is basing its new model on one pioneered in New York, where teachers get up to two hours of planning time a day.

In most of the innovation schools I’ve heard about in Denver, planning is a big emphasis. The schools’ longer days give teachers more time to work on strategies and research, together and individually. It’s a welcome relief for teachers who say they need more time to think.

A longer school day also gives leaders time to creatively work with kids. That includes setting aside time for extensive tutoring, which can mean the difference between a child learning at grade level or not.

Denver’s goal is to have more and more campuses qualify as innovative schools.

The district also wants more charter schools, which are free from most state regulations, other than having to measure up to performance standards.

Some education bureaucracies don’t like charters, but the Denver district has a compact with charter leaders to work together in giving students a shot at an excellent education. That’s smart because successful charters — be they national ones such as those associated with KIPP or locals like the Uplift Education network in Dallas — focus on fundamentals backed by research.

Los Angeles is pursuing innovation differently. Its school district has put some schools under the mayor’s watch. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is passionate about
education reform; he has persuaded the Los Angeles Unified School District to let a nonprofit he established bid to run some of the city's worst schools.

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools now oversees 22 campuses with 19,000 students. The goal is to ground them in proven practices.

So far, the experiment is working. The campuses under the mayor's watch are progressing on state exams, often ahead of other schools within L.A. and across the state.

It's best to set up an innovation shop outside the district so a superintendent is not tempted to showcase success when there really isn't much there. But however it's done, a big district like DISD could help itself enormously by emphasizing innovation.

To its credit, the Dallas school district has been working on new high school models. But it needs to match that idea with innovative approaches to middle school education. That's where students often fall so far behind that no amount of creative high school education can get them ready for college or a good post-secondary job.

The place to start is with a pilot project that floods participating middle schools with teachers qualified in core subjects, strong principals and research-driven practices. There's money to do this, too. The Texas Legislature set aside this year for local innovation projects.

Innovation is important for big districts with diverse populations because they face so many different kinds of students. They have to constantly rethink how they deliver an education.

SMU is a big part of this effort. Through its Ed-Entrepreneur Center and in partnership with The Teaching Trust, the school is training principals and aspiring principals in effective leadership, especially for big urban schools.

Getting better principals into schools will help energize the staff, create clear priorities for the campus and use data to drive decisions. But there is only so much a principal can do without a group of quality teachers. In some ways, getting good principals is far easier than getting good teachers. A school only needs one or two principals; it needs many strong teachers.

That's why districts should welcome candidates from Teach for America, which puts its recruits through intense preparation before they can consider a full-time stint. Similarly, the New Teacher Project aims to get passionate, highly trained people into classroom settings.

Leaders of big urban districts also have to be systematic about developing a talent pipeline. In Houston, where reformers have led the school board and the district, progress is seen as being about human capital.

Terry Grier, Houston's superintendent, told a group of Dallas business leaders and educators this year that his district is intent on selecting and developing good teachers and principals. He said the Houston district recruits heavily from Teach for America and other parts of the state. He also said that the district is seeking principals from within Texas and around the country. In other words, it is purposeful about improving its pipeline.

Houston also is intent on replacing ineffective teachers and principals. Its school board adopted a policy this spring that will allow the district to use classroom data in evaluating teachers. Not all evaluations will depend upon student scores, but the latter certainly will be a serious part of a teacher's yearly assessment.

Getting rid of poor teachers and principals is a major part of developing the leadership pipeline. If a district is going to flow strong leaders into schools, it must also flow ineffective educators out.

The third element big urban districts need is a passion for using data to drive decisions. Superintendents, principals, teachers and parents need easy access to data that show them how a campus, teacher or student is performing. And not just last year, last semester or last month, but right now.
Hinojosa was passionate about data. He would have spreadsheets in his office that guided him about what was going on across the district.

DISD also had new data options for parents to use. The district had started rolling out "parent portals" that give families facts about how their child is doing in a class, and, theoretically, even whether they showed up for school that day.

But the district has not yet made these portals available at all campuses. And the campuses that have them still need aggressive plans to instruct parents about how and why they should them.

What's more, some parents complain that the data is not as up to date as it should be. One commenter on this newspaper's Education Front said, "The data that the portal gave to parents at one school that I know of had a time lag of one to two weeks as the year progressed."

The good news is that philanthropic organizations such as the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation are intent on helping districts make data available to their campuses. The Dell Foundation funds initiatives that help districts break down the numbers so that they are easier for educators to understand and use.

Data not only allow teachers to intervene quickly with students, which is necessary to keep them from falling too far behind, but they also allow instructors to help students build their natural talents.

Accessible data also show districts which schools really need transforming. In Denver, the school district uses campus data to help identify which struggling schools should put together a proposal to become an innovation school. In Los Angeles, the district uses data to show which schools need new management.

And detailed information helps districts see which teachers deserve a special reward and which ones need more development. Or, if need be, which ones should be shown the door.

The term you hear in education circles is "actionable data," and it means using data for a purpose. Simply having the information does not do much. The data matter when they lead to action, which is the only way big urban districts can transform.

Finally, big districts need buy-in from parents.

This is important first from the students' perspective. If their parents are not engaged with them academically, there is a great chance they will end up doing only so-so in school. Education researchers like Heather Weiss of Harvard University note that engaged parents are a leading indicator of whether a child will succeed academically. And getting parents involved is a pretty inexpensive way to turn around schools.

Attending PTA meetings, serving on school committees and showing up for parent-teacher conferences are the first steps. But they are only the entry points to being an engaged parent.

What really moves the needle for students is when parents pay attention to their studies, read to them from a young age and don't let them fall behind.

President Barack Obama said his mother used to get him up at 5 a.m. to go over some of his lessons. When he would complain, she would shake her head and tell him that she didn't want to be up at hour, either: But he had to improve.

In short, school districts need lots of mothers like Obama's.

And districts can help activate them. Principals and teachers just need to be creative.

For example, schools can hire community liaisons whose job is to knock on doors, make calls, send emails, do whatever it takes to get parents involved. Money is tight these days, but this is one of the best investments a school can make.

Likewise, strong programs exist like the Dallas Concello's parent training initiative. The program is based on a model that researchers have cited as an excellent way to train parents on how to be strong advocates for their children. DISD should look for funds to expand this program to more campuses. In fact, Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said making a difference in schools by raising money to expand the program's reach.

One organization that does a good job of activating parents in Denver is Stand for Children Colorado. The group is part of the national Stand for Children organization, which has a chapter in Texas, but, unfortunately, does not yet operate in Dallas.

Lindsay Neil, who heads Stand for Children Colorado, told me this summer that her organization believes that it's important to get parents and teachers working collaboratively. One way they do that is to get them working together at the student's home.

That kind of collaboration leads to the next big reason to get parents involved: so they can help teachers. These instructors inherit whatever walks through their classroom doors. And too often that means children whose parents have not
gotten them ready for school that day.

But here, too, districts must pursue parental engagement with a strong sense of purpose. Obama mothers don’t always show up on their own.

In those schools under the mayor’s watch in Los Angeles, campuses actively seek out parents and train them. Marshall Tuck, who oversees the schools for the mayor, says representatives from the campuses not only knock on doors, they teach parents their rights. The schools host monthly parent academies. And the nonprofit overseeing them seeks out philanthropic money to fund those academies.

Again, there are no magic bullets. Districts don’t simply improve through some miracle.

But big urban districts can succeed. They increase their odds of doing so if they focus on these fundamentals: innovative schools, leadership pipelines, data-driven decisions and engaged parents.

Those of us who live in big cities like Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles and Denver have a big stake in them succeeding, too, whether we have kids in them or not. The students who come out of these schools will help drive our economy, invent the Next Big Thing or find a cure for a disease. Or not — and if that’s the case, we’re all in serious trouble.

Think of that the next time you drive by a school. What’s happening behind those doors affects us all.

William McKenzie is a Dallas Morning News editorial columnist. His email address is wmckenzie@dallasnews.com.
There is no magic bullet, says William McKenzie, but there are examples from across the nation that DISD should follow.

Can big urban school districts succeed? The subject is timely, with public schools starting tomorrow in Dallas and around Texas. And because Dallas school trustees are starting the process of selecting a new superintendent to replace Michael Hinojosa, the country has shown how to apply strategies to help their kids learn at grade level and beyond, and they offer examples for DISD to carefully consider.

The place to start is for districts to brace innovation and research, together and individually. It's practicalities of reform.

In Denver, the district has an office of innovation that oversees efforts by local places. For example, one Denver school is an “innovation school,” teachers, principals, parents and administrators working on a plan that incorporates best practices from other places. For example, one Denver school is having its model put into practice in New York, where teachers get up to two hours of planning time a day. It’s in the innovative school I’ve heard about in Denver, planning in big chunks. The school’s longer days give teachers more time to work on strategies and research, together and individually. It’s a valuable role for teachers who say they need more time to think.

One Denver school also gives leaders time to critically review work with kids. That includes setting aside time for remote tutoring, which can analyze the differences between a child learning at grade level and not.

Denver’s goal is to have more and more campuses qualify as innovative schools.

The elusive big idea

THINK SHARP

We are drowning in information with no time or desire to process it. No wonder some believe that there is no magic bullet, says William McKenzie, but there are examples from across the nation that DISD should follow.

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Section P

Sunday, August 21, 2011

Points

Retinking urban schools

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TALKING POINTS

“When war becomes good business for the insurgents,” is all the more difficult to convince them to lay down their arms,” — Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass., reacting to reports that more than $20 billion in U.S. cash have reached the hands of the Taliban and corrupt local leaders in Afghanistan (The Associated Press, Tuesday).

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William McKenzie's proposals for educational reform, Hastings Elementary, Duncanville ISD:

To its credit, the Dallas school district has been working on new high school models. But it needs to settle on a model that teachers agree upon instead of a middle-school model. That's where McKenzie's ideas come in.

The second major element districts need is a pipeline of leaders to feed into their universities and into their high schools. All the innovation projects in the world won't make a difference if there aren't enough good leaders to carry them forward.

It's a simple realization, but one that McKenzie and others have hit the nail right on the head because he spotted the best things schools need minimally.

Part of why some districts are struggling, and why charter schools are succeeding, is because waves of innovation are in their teens. Charter schools start from scratch, which means they can adopt and test techniques that are working elsewhere.

Emily Worland, psychology and governance scholar, School of Innovation, Carrollton:

Of William McKenzie’s suggestions, one of the best investments a school can make is in developing leadership pipeline. The district so a superintendent is not tempted to be strong advocate for their children. DISD

The Dallas Morning News editorial board has been calling for parents to be strong advocates for their children. DISD

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EDITORIALS

BRIDGING DALLAS’ NORTH-SOUTH GAP

No Excuses

Mayor must focus on southern Dallas high schools

Here is a fact about neighborhood schools in southern Dallas that should outrage everyone who understands that our entire city can succeed only if the neglected southern half succeeds: Ten of the 14 non-specialized high schools in southern Dallas scored “unacceptable” in the latest state ratings.

“Unacceptable” is the worst grade a school can get. It means students are so far behind in reading, writing, math, social studies or science that their chances of college or a good-paying job are somewhere between slim and none. Sure, there are exceptions, and we cheer those. But, by and large, these students are about to enter a world in which the deck is stacked against them.

The situation isn’t a lot better in the northern half of the city, where four of the seven traditional high schools are unacceptable. The biggest difference is that southern Dallas is home to twice as many neighborhood high schools and thus has twice the problem.

This horrid reality needs to capture the attention of Mayor Mike Rawlings, City Council members, school trustees, educators and, most especially, parents of students in these high schools. Actually, parents whose teens are in the other four traditional high schools in southern Dallas should be alarmed, too — those campuses were ranked “acceptable,” which means only 70 percent of the students are passing in reading, writing and social studies, 65 percent in math, 60 percent in science.

Dallas has several powerhouse magnet and specialized high schools in its southern half, including two of America’s top-ranked high schools. But those campuses draw from all across the city or have special missions.

Meanwhile, the ordinary neighborhood schools are in a deep hole when it comes to adequately educating students. Rawlings has promised both to be more involved in improving Dallas schools and to pay special attention to southern Dallas. A good place to confront both challenges is, when carving out his southern Dallas “buses” plan, that Rawlings includes these troubled schools.

For example, Rawlings can relentlessly advocate, and even work his sources, for helping the district settle for nothing less than top-line principals. Strong leaders such as Tony Tovar at Sunset High School, who walks the halls and knows his students individually, make a difference. And all the schools need resources that Rawlings’ contacts in the business and philanthropic worlds could provide, particularly if they better understand the direct connection between southern Dallas students’ success and our city’s success overall.

This newspaper saw the kind of innovation and drive our new mayor is capable of back when, as the city’s “homeless czar,” he became a visionary of The Bridge. Now it’s time to turn that kind of energy on southern Dallas, including its high schools.
EDITORIALS

TACTICS FOR A TURNAROUND

Where to Begin?

Start by developing strong DISD teachers

A central message of the essays in the Sunday Points section is that there is no one way to improve the Dallas school district. No major urban district in the entire country has located that single magic bullet.

But a good place to start is to focus on making sure the teacher pipeline that flows into Dallas classrooms delivers a strong talent pool. This is not just about bringing in good new teachers but about developing those already in the classrooms.

Some teachers will see this as a full-scale war against them. It’s not. The many good teachers in the Dallas Independent School District have little to worry about. Those are the ones who know the curriculum. Who know their students. Who know how to creatively teach the curriculum to those students.

But something is askew when it comes to teacher quality and the resulting academic success of the district’s students. Consider that 98 percent of DISD contract employees, the vast majority of whom are teachers, earn one of the top two rankings the district hands out in yearly evaluations. Now consider that the majority of neighborhood high schools in the district were recently graded as unacceptable. Nearly half of traditional middle schools drew the unacceptable ranking. Overall, the number of unacceptable DISD schools jumped from 14 to 33.

Answering the bell

What kind of reform works in an urban district like DISD? This week, Points asks leading education thinkers from around the country to answer that question, and you can read a slice of this newspaper’s answer to that question in this editorial.

Elsewhere in this section, you’ll find a wide range of insightful DISD-specific responses in essays exclusive to The Dallas Morning News, from No Child skeptic Diane Ravitch to controversial former Washington superintendent Michelle Rhee.

What reforms would you promote? What are you looking for in DISD’s next superintendent? We’d love to hear your ideas. Email points@dallasnews.com.

This data suggests a serious disconnect between teacher rankings and classroom results. There are plenty of ways to get started, but we’ll offer these:

- DISD needs to build close relationships with schools of education to help the district know what training its teachers need.
- The district must aggressively recruit talent, improving to the point that it can compete at the same level as the Houston district does.
- DISD should continue expanding the number of teachers it hires from intense training programs such as Teach for America and the New Teacher Project.
- When Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, introduced SB 4 in the last legislative session, she included several options for developing teachers. Her bill didn’t become law, but DISD can employ its concepts. For example, principals should work with teachers to develop a career path for each instructor and to offer opportunities to achieve goals. A common cause of teacher burnout is when he or she sees no way forward.

The future of DISD is a make-it-or-break-it deal for Dallas and all of North Texas. Our region can only be as good as the education it offers. This newspaper hopes that the essays in this Points section — and our own pump-priming ideas — enrich this critical conversation.
BRIDGING DALLAS' NORTH-SOUTH GAP

Making Parents a Priority

Principals, nonprofits must restore programs

Even if a child is blessed with the very best teacher and principal in the district, that student still needs adults at home who monitor homework, meet with instructors and help navigate the confusing maze of the school system. If you don't believe us, look at the research. Stacks upon stacks of it show that active parents generally make the difference between which students succeed and which fail.

Despite all that, parental engagement efforts in Dallas schools are in disarray because of budget cuts in Austin and short-sighted decisions by local school administrators. This is particularly devastating for at-risk students whose parents don't know how to penetrate school hierarchy or who hang back because of language barriers.

Most recently, DISD canceled two important parent initiatives and virtually wiped out the office responsible for coordinating parental programs. Yes, the state cuts are the root cause. And, to its credit, DISD has launched a new effort to train parent leaders across the district. But that doesn't make the decision to cut the engagement efforts right.

The district must restore the parent coordinator's office next year to ensure campuses across the city create a parent-accessible culture. As for the terminated programs, here's how they can be quickly reinstated.

Let's start with DISD's cancellation of its contract with the Dallas Concilio. Since 2002, the nonprofit operated a program that trains parents on how to advocate for their children. Last year, the Parents Advocating for Student Excellence seminars operated on 21 campuses, including 10 in Dallas' less-affluent southern half.

The program, built on a model ranked by a Harvard study as one of the nation's best for parental involvement, has produced results. Parents attend an intense 10-week course, in which they learn how to help their children stay in school, improve academically, meet graduation requirements and be prepared for college. A strong emphasis is placed on the parents' responsibilities in their students arriving successfully at the finish line.

Dallas principals have available money in their budgets to invest in the Concilio program during the fall or spring semester. It's critical that campuses make this investment to shore up the parent piece of the school-family-student partnership.

The second troubling DISD decision was the axing of its "parent portals," the informative online reports that schools were to produce for parents so they could stay current on assignments, test scores and attendance. Sophisticated portals are common in suburban districts and private schools. DISD operated them at a few dozen campuses.

But no more. Schools are returning to a previous electronic system, which is limited in its ability to alert parents to student needs. That's where the private sector can help. By providing funds for the portals, businesses and philanthropic organizations can ensure that parents may easily access data that helps them stay on top of their children's work.

Parental engagement is a priority of this newspaper, as it offers suggestions for a stronger Dallas school district. DISD says it too believes family involvement is fundamental. Now let's see if these fixes can be made quickly.
EDITORIALS

Re-evaluating Evaluations

DID reviews should include student scores

Look at these two sets of numbers and see if you find a disconnect:

About 98 percent of Dallas Independent School District instructors receive one of the top two rankings the district awards teachers after they complete their annual reviews. But less than half of DISD's schools earn one of the top two annual rankings from the state for their students' Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores.

What's more, only about 30 percent of Dallas students are on a track that reads them for college. In some Dallas schools, less than 10 percent of students are learning at a level that prepares them for a community college, a four-year university or a decent paying job after high school.

We don't know about you, but we see a clear disconnect in that data. That's why we're glad to see Dallas school trustees reconsider how the district evaluates teachers.

Trustees have started re-examining what elements should go into a review and they're considering including student data from the classroom. DISD has mapped out a plan to come up with a revised system in 2014. That goal may seem slow, but it's best to take enough time to work out a method that is fair to teachers and students than to rush one out that implodes.

Districts in Houston and elsewhere are using student scores on various exams in evaluations, but including student data remains controversial. Instructors argue they can't control what walks into their classrooms. Bad parenting, for example, makes it hard for educators to move children ahead during a school year. So does the poverty that many Dallas schoolchildren live in.

Those are understandable points, but student test scores should be among the measures used to review teachers. They show whether teachers are making a difference with their students. If a teacher is doing a dynamite job, their work will shine through. If a teacher isn't up to par, he or she can get better training. If that doesn't work, they can be shown the door.

The inclusion of scores can be done fairly, too. For example, an analysis of a teacher's work could include how much they helped students grow during a year, even if their students didn't always ace the state achievement test. That way, teachers could get credit for the progress their students make.

Interestingly, a recent survey of Dallas principals shows most of them favor a new way to review teachers. And DISD trustee Edwin Flores explained recently on The Morning News' Education Front blog that the current evaluation doesn't sit well with many teachers.

So, at least there is some sentiment among educators for starting over. A new system could give a more honest accounting of classroom skills, which ultimately helps students.