

Politicians should let educators lead efforts on school reform

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Isn't it time to end the St. Louis Public Schools experiment?

When Gov. Matt Blunt held a press conference Tuesday to discuss St. Louis schools, I was hoping he was about to announce a new plan, direction and new planners.

He didn't. Blunt just breezed into town to show his support for Rick Sullivan, the man he appointed to head the Special Administrative Board overseeing the St. Louis Public Schools.

Let's be real, this whole public school reform effort has been nothing more than a botched experiment orchestrated by politicians and board members either endorsed or appointed by politicians. They awarded the job of reforming the school district to a former clothing executive, Bill Roberti, in 2003. Then, earlier this year, they named Sullivan, a prominent homebuilder.

Sullivan, the new education czar for St. Louis schools, spent the summer learning about the district and meeting educators.

In this experiment, no one really knows what the future holds. We're not even sure if Sullivan has any authority since he has yet to be confirmed by the state Senate.

We hear nebulous rumors floating around about charter schools, voucher-supported private schools and yet-to-be-built magnet schools. But there's no clear, specific plan for the future.

I'm not the sharpest crayon in the box, but after watching this reform effort for four years, I can't help but wonder why more true education experts aren't in the mix from institutions like Washington University, St. Louis University, Harris-Stowe or the University of Missouri.

"Right now, this city is making decisions in the blind," said William Tate, professor and chairman of the department of education at Washington University. "This has all become political. What this city needs is a consortium between educational institutions and city leaders to provide sound information for parents who have to make decisions about their kids."

I called Tate after reading his letter in Wednesday's Post-Dispatch challenging data claiming charter schools are catching up academically with public schools.

Tate suggests more reliance on local scholars, especially when it comes to analyzing or utilizing complex data.

During our conversation, Tate said he wished politicians followed the lead of universities that do a better job of analyzing the long-term effects of educational policies.

As an example, Tate pointed to the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research. The organization "works in tangent with Chicago's public schools," Tate said.

"Say there's a study, Chicago won't make a decision until the consortium has broken down all the social variables the implementation will affect."

When politicians set the educational agenda solely based on test scores, they miss the big picture, Tate said.

"Test scores do not measure social development. You can't talk about the educational phenomenon without considering the housing, health, juvenile justice and dropout phenomenons. That's the role these great universities can play."

Politicians may set the educational agenda for now, Tate said, but St. Louis has the resources and "capacity to change."

"When it comes down to it, we're all in charge; it's a group deal. I think we can do better here," Tate said. "But it will require a consortium of leaders broadly concerned about the real future of our youth, not just test scores."

Bob Samples, director of communications for the University of Missouri-St. Louis, said his institution offers several precollegiate programs for inner-city youths and teachers pursuing careers in education. UMSL also works closely with legislators. But it plays no policy-setting roles in public education.

However, Samples added, Dr. Charles Schmitz, dean of the College of Education, is passionate about UMSL's role in the future of public education.

I say open the doors wide to those like Schmitz, Tate and others with the potential to understand and implement real educational reform.

Tate's idea for a consortium makes sense, but I'm in favor of leadership change first. The politicians, former executives and home builders should step aside and let educators take the lead in the business of revamping the city's public education system.

Let's be real. After all, public education should not be anybody's experiment.