

Why not turn to the pros for real reform in city schools?

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There was nary a blip on my radar last month when the St. Louis Public Schools selected its new superintendent, Kelvin Adams. No disrespect intended to the former staff chief of the Recovery School District of New Orleans. Mr. Adams seems a capable enough leader for the district's next experiment.

Yet, it's those two words, "leader" and "experiment" that frustrate me.

Let's face it, over the past decades, the city's public school system has been segregated, desegregated, integrated, chopped up, bused out, decertified and magnetized. Reform efforts have been little more than ill-conceived experiments led by politicians, their appointees and School Board members.

The head of the state-appointed, three-member Special Administrative Board is a prominent homebuilder for goodness sake. Like those in charge before, this group operates under the illusion that one powerful "leader" — Superintendent Adams, working with the board — will fix this long-busted vessel. The board's short-sighted goals, focusing mostly on improved test scores, don't address sociological, psychological and economic factors that also hamper education.

Public education reform, particularly in economically depressed urban areas, is no cakewalk. Why are neophytes (as well intended as some may be) leading this charge when the district is surrounded by the region's best colleges and universities? Shouldn't skilled academicians, scholars, researchers and higher education professionals be the ones responsible for drafting the future course of public education?

William Tate, professor and chairman of the department of education at Washington University, thinks so. This month, he published an article in the "Educational Researcher," a journal of the American Educational Research Association. In the article, Tate calls for an "intellectual merger" of researchers to study and influence the "geography of opportunity" in the region.

The article examines St. Louis' and Dallas' substantive investment in biotechnology and telecommunications, respectively. These initiatives have created jobs and educational institutions, raised median family incomes and stabilized neighborhoods. However, low-income residents, students, businesses and neighborhoods in both cities are not connected to the telecommunication or biotech "clusters."

This isolation guarantees an "uneven geography of opportunity," Tate argues. With researched, orchestrated planning, urban students could be better prepared to engage and benefit from the technically advanced environs of the future.

"If I build an industry in your community, then many social institutions will be supported," Tate explained. "That means better policing, better schools and better institutions to support my industry."

Tate's case studies demonstrate the rise in advanced educational degrees, median family incomes and thriving neighborhoods along the geographic track of the telecommunication and biotech clusters in Dallas and St. Louis. Just two of the areas along Dallas' "Telecom corridor" boast median family incomes of \$370,000 and \$162,000 annually.

Yet, Fair Park, one of the low-income neighborhoods south of the techno-hub, suffers from high unemployment and poverty.

Tate also examines the St. Louis region's four-part biotech corridor extending from downtown to St. Louis County to Earth City to St. Charles County. The city's "urban corridor," he explains, is bordered by "high-risk," high unemployment neighborhoods with more than 68 percent of all employees commuting from other parts of the region.

The other three clusters, however, have lower unemployment rates and median family incomes ranging in the \$100,000 to \$150,000 range.

More than 66 percent of the children in the St. Louis Urban Cluster qualify for the free or reduced-priced lunch program, which is an indicator of poverty. Less than 33 percent of children in the other biotech areas are eligible for the poverty program.

Tate said these "geographic characteristics" should be of high concern for education researchers. For example, he cites how brain development is "negatively altered by environmental conditions associated with poverty."

It is the "civic responsibility" of education researchers to determine the links between industrial development and developmental sciences, Tate says. These professionals should be charged with providing information related to "social, cultural and economic" interdependencies.

The professor also encourages public-private partnerships between city leaders and educational researchers to help prepare students and low-income communities share in geographical opportunities.

The article begins with a definition of the term "civic." Tate reminds us that the word is a derivation referring to the Roman civic crown awarded to someone "who saved the life of a fellow citizen in battle."

It's the "civic responsibility" of education researchers to help community leaders understand the correlations between science-related industries and regional opportunities, Tate said.

The battle to save public education in St. Louis can't be waged by one board or one man. The crown, Tate maintains, will be shared by those who adhere to a basic, unified mandate:

"Educational reform is economic reform that considers geographic factors very carefully."