

PINKSTON

SCHOOL BOARD ★ DISTRICT 7

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WHAT WE NEED FROM THE NEXT DIRECTOR OF SCHOOLS



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As a member of the Nashville School Board, a question I hear frequently right now is: “What are you looking for in the next director of Metro Nashville Public Schools?” Collectively, the board has outlined desired characteristics for

the future leader of America’s 42nd-largest school system, including generic descriptors such as “has a clear vision of what is required to provide exemplary education services and implement effective change.” For my part, I’m looking for a leader who can tackle specific priorities that I believe represent some of the most meaningful opportunities to move MNPS to the next level. Below are 12 detailed priorities (in no particular order):

1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Expansion of pre-kindergarten is one of the only areas where the school board is in near-unanimous agreement. However, we’ve got a long way to go in defining the scope and costs of universal pre-K — with “universal” meaning every student and family that wants a seat, gets one. National research shows that pre-K is, dollar for dollar, one of the best investments we can make. We need to accelerate pre-K expansion locally, even if Governor Bill Haslam and House Speaker Beth Harwell refuse to commit state resources to help.

2. ENGLISH LEARNERS

In Tennessee, 4.5 percent of public school

students are English learners. In Nashville, more than 15 percent of our students are English learners. We are the most diverse school system in the state and one of the most diverse in America. If we can deliver the highest-quality educational services to our youngest New Americans, then I believe all boats will rise in our school system. At the school board’s direction, management has developed an “English Learner Innovation Plan” that outlines \$16 million in new investments in areas such as language-intensive after-school programs, new technology to enable self-guided instruction, and more extensive teacher professional development. Another \$23 million is proposed to reduce class sizes in schools with high percentages of English learners. In terms of the budget, this plan will require a multi-year phase-in. We need to get started now.

3. READING INTERVENTION

This priority goes hand-in-hand with English learner initiatives, and addresses much broader challenges and opportunities in our school system. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, supported by philanthropies including the local Dollar General Literacy Foundation, says reading proficiency by third grade is the most important predictor of high-school graduation and career success. Unfortunately, only 37 percent of MNPS third-graders meet this standard. Ensuring that every student can read at grade level by the end of third grade is the most important thing we can do. We must aggressively expand

reading intervention, and do it with a sense of urgency.

4. TESTING TIME

We know that students, teachers and parents are exasperated by over-testing. HBO comedian John Oliver recently captured the national obsession with testing in a brilliant 18-minute segment that has drawn more than 4.5 million views on YouTube. Alberto Carvalho, head of Miami-Dade public schools, is engineering “the most aggressive decommissioning of testing in the state of Florida, if not the country.” The next director of MNPS will immediately capture the hearts and minds of this community if he or she will commit to reducing testing time. My suggestion: Begin with Achieve’s “Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts,” a tool that school system leaders can use to take stock of their assessments and assessment practices.

5. TURNAROUND STRATEGIES

MNPS has more than doubled its number of low-performing schools on the state of Tennessee’s “priority” list, which identifies the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state based on standardized test scores. Our school system went from having six schools on the list in 2012 to, as of late 2014, a total of 14 schools. Put differently: The number of students in exceedingly low-performing schools rose from 2,260 to 6,272, according to enrollment data in the state’s Report Card. Following criticism from the board, the last director scrambled to cobble together turnaround plans for each of the 14 priority schools. The next director needs to pressure-test those plans, determine if they’re sound and being implemented with fidelity, and build turnaround expertise in the Central Office and in the field. Nashville should have no schools on the state priority list.

6. FUNDING ADEQUACY

According to the Council of the Great City Schools, MNPS is ranked 54th out of 67 urban school systems in America in per-pupil funding.

This is due, in large part, to inadequate state funding and refusals by the governor and legislature to commit new funding for public education. The legislature’s Basic Education Program (BEP) Review Committee estimates the BEP is under-funded by nearly \$500 million, while education funding experts believe the actual number is likely in excess of \$1 billion. Even using the review committee’s conservative estimate, MNPS would receive about \$30 million more from the state, or an additional \$350 per-pupil on top of current per-pupil state and local funding of \$9,000. Tennessee’s system of funding public education was born in a courtroom in the 1980s. In keeping with our state’s modern history, a growing number of school systems have filed lawsuits or are actively exploring litigation to challenge state funding inadequacy. MNPS may choose to join these efforts. The next director should vigorously advocate for more state funding, even if it means joining other school systems in court.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Many of MNPS’s wounds are self-inflicted — especially when it comes to community engagement, or the lack thereof. During my time on the school board, poor communication has turned basic operational decisions, such as school rezonings and school sitings, into full-scale conflagrations with parents, students, citizens and taxpayers. A performance audit commissioned by the Metro Council, our funding authority, noted that the school system’s failings warranted the creation of a board committee specifically focused on “community and stakeholder relations.” This committee is up and running, but some board members have resisted setting minimum standards for community engagement. Notwithstanding board dysfunction, I believe the problem can be solved by a director who surrounds himself or herself with effective communicators who think and act strategically. Let’s fix this failing and eliminate these unnecessary distractions to the school system’s core mission of educating kids.

8. CONSTITUENT SERVICES

Nashville’s nine elected school board members represent sprawling geographic districts in a county that covers 504 square miles. According to the latest U.S. Census estimates, our community’s population now exceeds 668,000 — which means each board member on average serves more than 74,000 parents, students, citizens and taxpayers. School board districts are larger than state House legislative districts. Yet board members have been deprived of the basic tools and supports needed to effectively respond to the constituents who elected us. Part of this is our own fault. As a group, we haven’t prioritized constituent services. At the same time, management has done little to develop the infrastructure needed to help board members deal with constituent concerns on a timely basis. Rebooting our approach to constituent services, along with creating new a community engagement strategy, will go a long way toward restoring public confidence in our school system.

9. TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Despite repeated requests by board members, MNPS has not articulated a meaningful plan to recruit and retain the best teachers. Meanwhile, the National Council on Teacher Quality reports that two of the top four teacher-prep programs in America — Lipscomb University and Vanderbilt University — are located within a stone’s throw of our school system’s Central Office. We should be hiring as many new teachers as possible from those two institutions and, as a major purchaser of teaching talent, we need to insist that other institutions step up their game. We also need a top-to-bottom review of our teacher compensation system to understand how we stack up against competing and similarly situated U.S. school systems, such as Atlanta, Austin, Charlotte, Denver and Louisville. For teachers currently employed by MNPS, we need to be talking every day about how to provide the best professional development to help them help our kids. I want the next director to adopt the mantra of Alvin Wilbanks, the long-serving director of Georgia’s Gwinnett County schools:

“There are two types of people who work for our system. Those who teach and those who support those who teach.” Amen.

10. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Think of MNPS as a system of 86,000 students. Further, think of MNPS as a system of 6,000 educators. Then, think of MNPS also as a system of 140 principals. Making sure there’s a top-notch leader in every school building is perhaps our biggest lever of change.

11. UNABATED CHARTER GROWTH

This is the defining issue for the Nashville School Board. Some board members, pandering to special interests intent on dismantling public education, want to continue unchecked growth of publicly financed privately run schools. Other board members believe it’s time to recommit to public education and protect finite resources to help students and teachers in existing schools. To put it in perspective: In 2010, the entire state of Tennessee had just 20 charter schools. This fall, in Nashville alone, 27 charters will operate at an annual cost of \$75 million. Even if the school board approves no new charter applications, more than 6,500 additional charter seats — costing another \$59 million a year — will come into existence by fall 2019 under current agreements. A comprehensive audit of MNPS found that when new charter schools open, they siphon funds from traditional schools while costs such as staffing, maintenance and technology can’t be easily adjusted. The audit validated a 2014 report commissioned by the school board that found “new charter schools will, with nearly 100 percent certainty, have a negative fiscal impact.” To be sure, some charter schools are doing good work (as are some MNPS schools). But simple math tells us that we cannot sustain unabated growth of new schools of any type without systematically starving existing schools. Balancing new investments across multiple sectors and priorities is a matter of fairness and responsibility.

12. LEADERSHIP STYLE

The previous MNPS director's leadership style was to pit people against each other — board members, staff members, parent leaders, community leaders. I hope the next director will not lead by divide, but rather find a way to unite people and erase the culture of fear that pervades the school system. I also hope this person will demonstrate courage and intestinal fortitude when it comes to dealing with radical state policies. When the governor and legislature set out to punish the capital city's school system, the director of schools should be the first person on the front line fighting for public education — not pandering out of political expediency.

OTHER PRIORITIES

Wraparound services like health screenings for low-income students and families. Exceptional education. Alignment between academic standards and instructional materials. Expansion of the MNPS free meals program. Technology in the classroom. Energy efficiency to drive cost-savings in a system with 14 million square feet of buildings. The list goes on and on. But these are enough, for now.

LOOKING AHEAD

Let me propose the following compact: If our next director of MNPS will dream big, show some spine, commit to these priorities and others, and — here's the really important part — back it all up with action, then he or she will have my full support. I promise.

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