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FAYETTE SCHOOLS NEED EFFECTIVE, INSPIRING LEADER

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Monday, May 10, 2004

Author: Richard Day

Among the Fayette County public schools' success stories is Northern Elementary. Long thought of as a school to be avoided, a renaissance has taken place -- and it occurred because the faculty and staff have strong, steady leadership and a clear focus, and they work hard to make it happen. It's not the program; it's the people who make the difference.

Northern is a high-poverty school that has narrowed the achievement gap while reducing suspensions, but, the district says Northern must change.

Northern's faculty and staff have crafted a safe and fair environment where every child can learn, but the district says Northern must change.

The Northern approach serves as a model for others and an inspiration for high-performing schools. The data clearly show that things are moving in the right direction. But Northern must change -- whether the principal, who seems to know what she's doing, thinks it's in the best interest of the children or not.

Why? Because Northern needs resources if it is to continue its progress. It needs the smaller class size Title II grant that is being held hostage by central office. The message is clear. Northern must surrender its best judgment for that of the district, or the district withholds the funds Northern needs to continue its success.

This is all about control, not about what's best for children. Northern has been doing just fine in that department. The same is true for all Fayette County elementary schools that want to make improvements in student achievement through smaller class sizes. Conform or be denied. I'm fairly certain this is not what One Community, One Voice had in mind.

Immediate past Superintendent Ken James says that "the district has a responsibility to ... direct money into programs it thinks will help students." The district also says it understands the critical role principals play in the success or failure of a school, and that all schools are different.

But that doesn't stop the district from disregarding the data and the principal to coerce a one-size-fits-all program. The district says a lot of things. Much of it conflicts. One thing is clear: Any system that does not tolerate strong leadership at the school level won't have it for long. I'm fairly certain this is not what the school board had in mind.

There is a leadership crisis in our school district that needs to be fixed quickly. As the school board considers superintendent candidates, it is appropriate to discuss whether the next superintendent should be from inside the district or outside, and what qualities are crucial.

Given recent history, I can think of nothing more important than finding a qualified person who knows the district, shares the board's vision and has a demonstrated commitment to Fayette County and its children. We need a steady hand on the wheel.

For all of his gifts, James was ultimately a disappointment. Now he is gone and Northern must change. Tough luck for Northern. If measured by the results, this eight-month administration shouldn't leave much of a legacy.

I just hope James' move to balance our budget on the backs of disabled students doesn't come back to haunt us. The worst-case scenario would be a legacy that returns us to civil rights complaints and Department of Education corrective action plans.

In the end, authority is not a fitting substitute for leadership. Effective leadership is about inspiring and directing the activities of people around a common mission -- not the creation of programs, promises and excuses. We had better find a superintendent for whom the success of each and every child in Fayette County is a personal priority. There is no substitute for that.

Caption: (1) by PABLO ALCALA , STAFF - System's one-size-fits-all mentality will destroy Northern Elementary School's spirit and progress.

(2) - **Richard Day** will retire this year as principal of Cassidy Elementary School in Lexington.

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