

Thomas M. Stephens: School 'reforms' are doomed to failure

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The Columbus school board and Superintendent Gene Harris are willing to gamble with other people's children, as they sacrifice their schools on the altar of "school reform."

They plan to contract with an outside group to administer South High School. And to field-test a new state law that allows parents to take over failing schools.

A contractor has yet to be found for South High. But some arrangements have been announced: Its principal and teachers will remain. An \$8 million federal grant is needed for this new adventure and for work in three other schools.

No other Ohio district has found it necessary to outsource the management of its schools. Or to be a guinea pig for Gov. John Kasich's dicey plan for parents to take over failing schools. These are acts of desperation, like tossing gobs of spaghetti at walls to see what sticks.

South High does need help; last year it met state standards in only three of 12 indicators and had a dismal graduation rate, slightly over 40 percent.

Harris framed her willingness to be the first district to experiment with the "parent-trigger" law as an act of leadership to help develop a sound process.

The governor and legislators' micromanagement reveals (once more) their cluelessness about how to improve public schools; after mandating this bad joke, they assigned its operation to the State Board of Education.

This would be fine and dandy, if it were based on any reasonable chance of success. Instead, it's a Hail Mary, a desperate move by self-appointed "reformers" who have helped bring urban schools to their knees and who now call for more charter schools as replacements. Soon both teachers and their students' parents will be labeled *failures*.

There are no secrets as to why many urban schools need help, or how to improve them. For the most part, achievement tests are measures of the socioeconomic status of students and their families. The urban poor face inequalities, often at conception, and too many persist into adulthood. Sure, good public schools can help, but the metrics now being used give a false picture of their efforts.

Yes, there are incompetent teachers, but proportionally no greater than any other profession. Their peers and principals know who they are; we don't need to spend millions of dollars to find them.

Even with the best teachers, student achievement in poor urban schools will be problematic, as long as the measures of success ignore the individual learning needs of students and the instructional support needed by their teachers and families.

These problems can't be solved by schools alone. The remedies must include their families and communities. That's why the plan for parents to take over schools is doomed to fail.

Schools do need to be more responsive to students by providing programs and instruction that fit their needs, not predetermined by state laws. There is good evidence to suggest that active parent involvement can help students and their families. But such efforts present real costs and challenges for both schools and families.

A better use of the \$8million would be to invest in parent-support systems in school attendance areas. This will involve careful planning and much patience and time. The hard work of community-based education requires enlightened state and local leadership as well as family-support programs that serve schools.

If our elected state and federal officials really want to improve public schools, they should start addressing these inequalities, instead of wasting time and resources on more charter schools and other silly notions.

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