

Michael MacNaughton: Miles has demonstrated little progress in the Dallas schools



Emmett J. Conrad High School

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In May 2013, I predicted on these pages that Dallas ISD Superintendent Mike Miles' market-driven reforms eventually would fail. His "Destination 2020" plan contains all the hallmarks of the Broad Foundation style of school reform: increasing class sizes; imposing high-stakes, test-based accountability systems for teachers and students; and pay-for-performance schemes. Miles is a 2011 graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy.

To date, not a single major, urban district has seen success through these reform methods.

Miles had the courage and support of the mayor and regional chamber behind him to force through difficult changes in hiring, policies and performance measures while weathering criticism that the changes

were hastily adopted, poorly implemented and based on the shortsighted argument that “we need change now, not next year.”

Now that little progress has been demonstrated, the cry is that more time is needed.

After *The Dallas Morning News*' editorial board recently gave the superintendent a B- in its annual scorecard, editorial writer Sharon Grigsby asked in a blog item: “If Miles is so wrong — what should we be doing instead?”

Respectfully, here are some practical and successful approaches currently practiced in other districts that could be used in DISD:

Data don't define kids

Suggestion: Revise the district's grading policy substantially, decreasing the number of daily grades while requiring more project-based learning. Eliminate district-mandated assessments (ACPs and benchmarking), which will recapture several weeks of instructional time. Implement PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) at DISD campuses to help solve discipline issues.

Suggestion: Eliminate class-size waivers and large class loads in secondary schools that cause overcrowded classrooms and overburdened teachers. DISD has 1,500 fewer teachers now than it did four years ago, when the Texas Legislature cut education funding.

A definitive study published by the National Education Policy Center ([February 2014, titled “Does Class Size Matter?”](#)) concluded: “Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes, and one that can be directly determined by policy. All else being equal, increasing class sizes will harm student outcomes.”

Educators as experts

We believe a major role of the teacher is to engage students as passionate participants in learning through project-based, participatory, educational adventures. The role of the principal is to remove any impediments and procure requested resources, enabling teachers to be more effective. Administration's role is to support and retain teachers.

Suggestion: Keep teaching talent on the campus and in the classroom. If DISD instructional coaches are master teachers — they should be — then why not keep them in the classroom to team-teach? It makes a world of difference having two adults in the classroom. Novice teachers then learn by example rather than through disruptive, punitive measures.

Close the classroom door. Restore planning and collaboration time for teachers. End the excessive meetings that consume teachers' time. Implement research-based professional development created at the district or regional level. Current professional development is not working, especially on secondary campuses. Institute a true peer-review evaluation system.

Fixing district culture

The schools should provide a nurturing, friendly and welcoming environment that encourages parental and community involvement. Teachers should be respected by their principals and administrators. Successful districts build a culture of trust and don't use fear as motivation. These districts regularly assess student progress — not to punish teachers but to address student needs.

Suggestion: Administrators should drop in on classes unannounced, not with punitive scoring but to offer help to struggling teachers and propose ways the classroom could be run more effectively. Only consistent, targeted instruction in stable schools — vs. constant churn and disruption — will achieve the results we all want.

Suggestion: End the district-wide climate of bullying and intimidation by strengthening the district's workplace bullying policy and giving it some teeth.

Curriculum

Suggestion: Create and support innovative in-district charter schools. A proposal, fully vetted and supported by teachers, administrators and citizens, was presented to the board this year but languished in committee as the trustees were distracted by the home rule controversy.

Suggestion: Emphasize reading in the content area. Our kids have difficulty learning to read and then reading to learn. Increase the number of librarians and library resources. Expand dual-language education throughout the district, especially in schools with predominantly black student populations. Provide art, music and recess — more time for students to play and create, particularly in the lower grades. Encourage flexibility in lesson plan design. The lock-step approach doesn't work for every subject and grade level.

Suggestion: Finally, the district should place a moratorium on all purchased educational programs until the efficacy and effectiveness of current programs can be definitively assessed. Millions are wasted on the "latest and greatest" programs, which lie gathering dust on classroom shelves across the district.

The status quo is not acceptable, and there is still much work to be done.

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