

Boston superintendent faces heat over reorganization plan

It's one thing when talk of tight budgets requires the need to nibble from a laundry list of line items to make the numbers work for the next year.

It's another when the depth of such needed cuts must go significantly further, to where talk escalates to having to write up plans outlining the closing of schools, for instance.

And one thought that the shutting off of streetlights in Winchendon a couple years ago as a cost cutting measure was extreme.

Even with the ongoing strain of tight budgets for school districts throughout northern Worcester County, the extent to which the Boston Public Schools is having to implement a makeover is something that all school districts should keep a wary eye on.

While there might be no such plan to put any area schools on the chopping block in the next few years, that could change depending on how well the Boston district's shift plays out. The outcome could well point to whether it might be repeated throughout other districts, or die a quick death, if it fails to achieve the set goals as hoped for by the reorganization.

For Boston Public Schools Superintendent Carol R. Johnson, the decision to proceed with closing or merging 18 schools has clearly placed her in the spotlight. Whether she will be remembered for wearing goat horns and pushing a plan that was first detailed on Dec. 2, or

will be commended for the "Redesign and Reinvest" plan, it will likely require a few years to allow for the massive change to shake out.

EVOLVING EDUCATION



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For Boston Teachers Union president Richard Stutman, though, there is clearly no desire to wait before placing judgment, deeming that Johnson be outfitted for horns.

"The schools that are closing are pretty good or they have changed dramatically and improved recently," said Stutman. While Johnson might want to agree with Stutman on some of those points, the fact that thousands of seats are open each year in the district, and that the district is wasting millions on them annually, was a problem that needed to be dealt with seriously with a yawning budget deficit.

On Wednesday night at Boston English High School, a throng of parents, wanting to support the schools which their children currently attend, came out for a four-hour meeting along with community activists and even students, trying to put the

brakes on the plan.

Despite the turnout, though, the Boston School Committee voted unanimously to move ahead with the district's cost-cutting plan — causing many in the crowd to fire back with yells of "Shame on you!" to go with boos and jeers such as "Traitor!" and "Sellout!" aimed at the superintendent as she was reading from a statement to spell out the rationale for the decision prior to the vote. Things got so heated that the committee chairman Gregory Groover was left with having to offer up the only threat that would get the crowd's attention, albeit with limited success — stopping the meeting.

In that testy environment, police officers were present to prevent the meeting from getting completely out of hand. It's no wonder that Mayor Thomas Menino, who had previously voiced support for the plan, chose to steer clear of that tinder box.

Getting a sense of just how tough the crowd was, upon the making of any suggestion for the need of the district to save money, whether it be to close or merge certain schools, or finding cost savings in the teachers contract, those in attendance wanted to hear nothing of any such painful change. With the projected budget gap for next year being so significant, saving on a few reams of paper or buying a few less pens simply won't jerk the budget back into the black.

On Thursday, Menino deemed the vote, while tough, as necessary, commending the decision

to be "proactive" rather than "reactive."

Staring down a \$63 million deficit for the next year, though, is one that this corner finds hard to call "proactive" in dealing with now. The red ink didn't get that deep in a single year, mayor.

Making it even more obvious that the problems have been allowed to fester is the realization that the district has seen its school population dwindle over many years, to where nearly 5,600 open seats are spread throughout the district, pointing for the need for improving efficiency.

And the amount of red ink solely from those empty seats? An estimated \$20 million a year, which in essence is money being lit on fire. For a district with 56,000 students, that's one empty seat for every 10 that are filled, spread among its 135 schools.

As dramatic as the plan might seem to many — with the closing of nine schools, merging eight into four, and the creation of two charter schools, paired with the opening of one innovation school — millions are expected to be saved, but even all that, the savings expected from the reorganization is expected to run at just about \$10 million.

For Johnson, the preference obviously would be to have to do something less dramatic. She stated, however, that "If we continue with the business as usual, then we won't have the resources to provide any school with the resources that they need."

Mayor Menino then explained

the benefit of the reorganization: It would provide room to grow for programs that had shown success in fostering student achievement.

That didn't mean that a few of the committee members didn't try one last foray into limiting the extent of the plan's changes, as three members attempted to tweak it to not include the merging of an elementary and middle school together in East Boston, as well as two members who aimed to stymie the closing of a Roxbury elementary school, with the idea that it could be merged with a neighboring school.

Similar to the compromise recently made by President Barack Obama and Congressional Republicans on the temporary extension of the Bush tax cuts, paired with a 13-month extension of unemployment benefits, when it became clear that the merging of the East Boston schools or the closing of another were to be a part of the approved plan, though, each of the three school committee members stepped back and voted in favor of the original plan, knowing there wasn't enough support for a modified one.

Among the other ways that Mayor Menino is hoping to realize savings are through significant changes to the teacher's contract — in allowing an extension of the school day, since the city has "one of the shortest school days in the commonwealth" — as well as the tying of compensation to student performance because of the need to "reward our best teachers for

outstanding results in the classroom."

Knowing how coolly Gardner residents took to a proposal to extend the day at Gardner Middle School in 2007 through the city's attempt at obtaining a Extended Learning Time Grant, the likelihood that such a proposal will be received warmly, particularly after the contentious battle with this plan, seems unlikely. And while it might seem from a distance that teachers would be encouraged with the prospect of being rewarded for their students' successes, the track record in other districts throughout the country is rather poor.

But for all the frustration over the extensive cuts in the plan, Boston's leading fiscal watchdog, the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, voiced the need to go even further, and do so within the next year or two.

Then again, for all the stress exhibited by parents and children of those schools that are on the chopping block, Johnson could once again yank back on the deadline, as previous reorganization plans offered by Johnson the last couple of years were pulled back on when the day of reckoning was about to arrive. At least Johnson, in her acknowledging her previous retreats in a Nov. 17 speech, made clear that this time would be different, and that this plan would move forward if approved.

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