

South Bend Tribune

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Viewpoint: How to strengthen South Bend schools

Stuart Greene South Bend Tribune

Feb. 20, 2016, 5:00 a.m. ET

In his Feb. 14 Viewpoint, Jay Caponigro explains the process of including local community members in selecting a new superintendent of the South Bend Community School Corp. I applaud the effort to be transparent and appreciate the extent to which the school board president cites some of the progress in the corporation, particularly improvements in technology, graduation rates and the increase in both magnet programs and preschool opportunities.

Such a portrayal can help attract potential leaders to the school corporation, but I wonder how the families of students attending local schools might describe the state of schools in South Bend and how a new superintendent will address the problems that have long existed in the schools.

In 2000, the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County commissioned a research consultation firm from Harvard called ThoughtBridge to do an assessment of the schools' strengths and challenges. In 2011, the school board invited ThoughtBridge back for a checkup. The opening paragraph in the report from 2011 is very telling: "in the eleven years since we last visited South Bend ... not only has there been little action ... that inaction has exacerbated the existing problems and created new problems for SBCSC." I wonder what has changed during the past five years. Pages 10-12 outline "challenges" and "barriers" including: 1. the inability to educate poor children and children of color; 2. the belief that resources are not equitably distributed to schools; and 3. a number of other factors which hamper the corporation's ability to deal with the challenges it faces (e.g., race, poverty, nepotism/favoritism, poor quality teaching).

It is not enough to attract good leaders, but to hire a superintendent who has demonstrated success in the areas that continue to plague the corporation: distributing resources more equitably, developing curricula that meet the needs of all students and retaining students from the time they enter high school as freshmen until they graduate from high school, a concern that Caponigro ignores in citing increases in graduation rates. What about the widening gap between black, white and Latina/o students who graduate with and without waivers?

Parents and families have voiced their concerns about disproportionality in school discipline, an area that the board has been said to be working on. In 2013-2014, black students were 34 percent of the student enrollment and received 62 percent of exclusionary discipline while white students were 36 percent of student enrollment and received only 17 percent of exclusionary discipline. That same year, black students missed 4 million minutes of instruction due to discipline compared with just 1 million minutes missed by white students — a full four times more days of missed instruction. Analysis of discipline data revealed that attendance was the second overall reason why students received out-of-school suspensions. As schools across the country work to end the school-to-prison pipeline, the children in South Bend are often excluded from instruction for minor disciplinary infractions.

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With others, I'd like to see board members and school officials provide data on rates of discipline disaggregated by student subgroups, such as race, ethnicity, disability status and English learner status. What data exist to show the successes and barriers to achieving the goals of the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports program implemented in SBCSC? How, if at all, is the SBCSC planning to implement the school climate and discipline reform provisions required by the state and that are now promoted in the Every Student Succeeds Act?

Providing specific answers to the questions I have raised has the potential to build stronger community-parent-school relationships to ensure that all kids in the corporation succeed. To disseminate this information widely, it would be useful for

board members and school officials to hold parent-community meetings at local schools or public libraries. The more opportunities like these, the better chance of creating vital relationships among key stakeholders that will increase community participation.

Stuart Greene has conducted research in South Bend Community School Corp. schools and is author of “Race, Community, and Urban Schools: Partnering with African American Families.”