

Five big steps to a turnaround

By **Steve Brandt**
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Are the Minneapolis schools locked in a death spiral?

Not necessarily, but observers say school district leaders need to make some key decisions quickly. Reformers who have watched the district grapple with its challenges over the years say these are the crucial areas to address.

1 Competition: Mimic what the best charter schools offer — small, locally run schools with fewer restraints, often with ethnic-oriented programs, that show results.

2 Finances: With little relief likely from state or federal levels, the district can ease its financial stress by closing schools and creating programs that attract families. Minneapolis interim Superintendent David Jennings floated some ideas like this — schools that would be all-girls or all-boys or culturally specific for Latinos — in the school reorganization proposal that was dropped last month.

3 Achievement: The racial gap is the district's most significant issue, and there's no silver bullet. Better attendance, kindergarten preparation, all-day kindergarten, parent involvement and less school-hopping — by teachers and students alike — all would help. One important step would be to assign more experienced teachers in the most challenged schools either by renegotiating the contract or offering financial incentives.

4 Community confidence: Unpopular decisions go down easier when there's a dialogue with the public. The school board could have learned this lesson when its appointment of David Jennings as superintendent blew up last fall for lack of public input. But it didn't, and Jennings' school-closing proposal faltered mainly because the public was caught off-guard.

There are signs that the board gets this now, with an upcoming series of community planning sessions this spring. That conversation may make it easier for the public to accept the district's ideas, including a new closing proposal.

5 Leadership: Some suggest that the selection of a new superintendent is crucial.

"What do I fear most? That they get a real loser for the superintendent position," said Cliff Hoffman, one of the district's outside auditors.

Public education critic Ted Kolderie said it's the system that needs to change, not the leader. "It's not at all clear the needs of the city wouldn't be served by shrinking the district down, doing what it can for the kids who want to stay, and letting the rest leave," he said.

Steve Brandt is at sbrandt@startribune.com and 612-673-4438.

GIVEN THE CHOICE

QUESTIONS FOR DAVID JENNINGS, INTERIM SUPERINTENDENT

Would you start your kids in Minneapolis public schools?



"I wouldn't hesitate to start them in Minneapolis. ... But you see, I know what some of the parents hear across the back fence, what almost nobody reads in the paper very often, about the good stories of what goes on in these schools. So I know success is possible for kids. ...

"Having said that, I would be — as they say in national security circles — on a 'heightened state of alert' about where this is all going. ... Because if I was a parent and ... I talked to people who know what they are talking about, the message I would be getting is that the situation is serious, that the pressure from the state and feds is significantly changing the way that business gets done, and that those changes could go one of two ways and that one of the two ways is not good. So I would be paying close-enough

attention to try to figure out which of those two outcomes is actually happening. ...

"It's conceivable that ... changes occur that are positive for the system. It's possible that funding continues to be reduced or, in an effort toward reform ... a bad choice gets made and it causes further weakening of the system. But I think that given all of the political, governmental, community pressure that's on the system ... that we're reaching a turning point here soon."

► **Would you start your child in Minneapolis public schools if you lived at 26th and Dupont Aves. N. and were a parent of color?**

"If I were a parent of color, I would be asking a lot tougher questions of the school involved because of the achievement gap issues. In my case,

I'm white and white kids are doing very well in the system overall. ... It is kids of color that are struggling more, and if I were a parent of color I'd be asking tough questions about that."

► **What sort of questions would you ask?**

"I would want to look at the — if you'll pardon the expression — the report card of that school, of how children are doing in that school, and most particularly children whose race and cultural background is the same as mine. ... I'd be interested in knowing the experience level of the staff and the stability of the staff. For example, if my kid was going to be in kindergarten, or first grade or second grade, whatever, next year and I knew that they were going to be in Miss Jones' class, one of the things

I'd like to know is if Miss Jones is still going to be there next year. And I'd be interested in knowing what other kinds of supports are available ... beyond literacy, because of course I want my child to be literate and I want my child to pass the state math test, but I want them to have a much broader perspective than that. I want them to have some appreciation for ... other things as well, and so I'd be asking those kinds of questions.

"But my real motive would be that I need to meet the people who are taking responsibility for my child and look 'em in the eye and have conversations with them. ... 'Cause ... as a parent it's hard for me to evaluate one curriculum vs. another, but I do have some experience evaluating people — who I can trust and who I can't."

Steve Brandt



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