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Discretion allows educators to adapt programs to pupils

By JACK PERRY

flex-i-ble -- characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements: "a flexible foreign policy," "a flexible schedule"

Flexible might be my favorite word as an educator. Without the flexibility to hire and deploy staff, allocate funds and create innovative programs, our 180 young men would not be having the success they are: between 1.5 and 2.4 years of academic growth in our first year of operation.

Example: It doesn't take a college degree to know that kids who are two or three years behind need much more instructional time to catch up. We have used our flexibility to add two extra hours to every school day, a Saturday academy and two additional weeks to the school year.

Example: We know that we need to do everything we can to nurture strong bonds between our students and teachers. Flexibility allows us to give participating teachers a stipend for a cell phone in return for their being available until 9 p.m. every school night to answer students' questions about homework.

Example: We know that students who come from families where no one has had the chance to earn a college degree need to see what a college campus looks like. Flexibility allows us to make college field trips starting in fifth grade a central part of our academic program.

Examples such as these underscore the common-sense interventions that are possible when principals and their teaching staff have the freedom and flexibility to make decisions based on the needs of our students, not to meet some one-size-fits-all mandate.

My educator colleagues in traditional public schools deserve no less than what we in the charter school sector have earned.

In our school, up to 70 percent of our funding is discretionary, meaning that we can set our own priorities. We can hire teachers and staff who share our sense of urgency and passionate belief that the sky's the limit for our students as long as they work hard. By contrast, principals in traditional public schools have discretion with less than 8 percent of their dollars; all the rest of the money has strings attached. So much for a teacher with this level of seniority, so much for this after-school program and so on. It's as if traditional public school educators are being asked to run a marathon with leg shackles on. That's not fair.

The flip side of flexibility is accountability, and educators should be held accountable for helping students learn at high levels. That's our job. But don't hold educators accountable for things they cannot control -- budgets where virtually all the decisions have been made for them, and contracts where teachers basically have to break the rules to work harder.

Teachers and principals in public schools all over the state want to do right by their students. But until they are empowered to do their best work, too many students will continue to lag behind. And accountability will continue to mean following the rules instead of focusing on what matters most: giving our neediest kids hope, opportunity and the tools to succeed.