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Bold, rigorous action needed to make schools top-notch

By JOHN H. TAYLOR JR.

For more than 20 years Delaware has struggled with public school reform. There have been some successes but, as any honest observer must acknowledge, the state's public schools are not world class.

Our students compete not only with their peers in Maryland and Pennsylvania or even California and Florida, they compete with young people from Japan and India and Great Britain and Norway and a host of other countries where learning is highly prized and students work hard and succeed in making themselves competitive in the modern world.

Can we afford to continue to take small, incremental steps in our efforts to make the schools all that they must be? I don't think we can. We must take bold, rigorous action.

The only way this will happen is if all the adults involved put student success at the top of every list. We must put student success ahead of adult concerns. Everyone involved - parents, teachers, administrators, school board members and politicians - must be engaged in and held accountable for our students' success.

A lot of people have worked hard to define what constitutes good schools and what elements must be present for schools to guarantee that all students will learn at the highest level of their ability. The research produced in the early- and mid-1990s by the Delaware Business Round Table and the subsequent partnerships among teachers, state and local administrators and college professors helped to make Delaware's standards among the highest in the country. In addition, the Department of Education has developed a data system that is, in fact, world class.

But we continue to allow schools that have failed their students year after year to languish in their failure without effective help or guidance. There a lot of schools like this. Why?

And our work on holding adults accountable in a meaningful way for the progress students make in school is woefully inadequate. We've adopted the rules and regulations but haven't properly put them into practice in most situations. Why?

For nearly four years a coalition representing a wide range of public sector and private sector interests, including unions and business leaders, teachers and administrators, has worked to develop a plan to transform our schools. It's a plan informed by data collected from around the country and around the world and it is a call for rigor and intellectual honesty and excellence. Called Vision 2015, it is the foundation upon which we can build a world class school system.

I know there is a lot of talk about the federal challenge for education excellence known as Race to the Top. And Delaware should do whatever it takes to get a good sized chunk of the \$4.5 billion that U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan is offering as a reward for those states that show they can meet his tough demands for better schools. Delaware can meet those demands, if it wants to, but it will take the kind of political will that has been in short supply. And the real point is that: we should do what it takes to make our schools world class whether or not we receive any Race to the Top funds. It's the morally right thing to do.

Gov. Jack Markell ran on an education platform and he now has the opportunity to become the governor who leads Delaware's schools to greatness. But he is going to have to make proposals that many people, including some who supported him last year, won't like. I've known the governor for several years and I think he's got the character and the courage to do what needs to be done for Delaware's young people. His appointment of Dr. Lillian Lowery as Secretary of Education was the first indication that he means business about transforming the public schools. She is bright and tough and has formulated a bold plan that will take Delaware public schools where they need to go.

If parents want good schools for their children they are going to have to recognize that some schools, perhaps even ones their children attend, are not doing the job they need to do. And instead of just ignoring this or complaining, they have to demand that state and district officials provide the schools with the tools they need to be successful. That means high quality teachers and lots of flexibility for teachers and other school leaders.

Superintendents and school boards may have to give up some power to enable schools in their care to improve. Teachers will have to find creative ways to share leadership and to make sure the best teachers work with the most educationally needy students and get paid for the quality work they do. Legislators also must put students' interests first. They have to listen to those advocating what's best for children, not those seeking what's best for adults. The business community has supported reform for years. Now it must be vocal in its support of bold plans for making the state's schools the best in the world and it must make sure politicians from both parties know that nothing less than the best is acceptable.

All of us must demonstrate to school officials and to legislators that the time for meaningful changes is upon us; the acceptance of the status quo is no longer acceptable; we do not intend to sit back while hundreds, if not thousands, of students are passed along each year without any realistic hope of being competitive in this complex, 21st-century world.

We can do this, if we really want to do it.
