



November 29, 2009

## Supporting an educational portfolio

*COMMUNITY VIEW*

By *SONDRA M. SHIPPEN*

The time is middle to late August and schools throughout the state are opening their doors and preparing for another year of educating students. In Delaware, we have talked about improving students' educational outcomes and searched for ways to make sure that all students are given opportunities to excel academically.

In the educational community, we sought ways to prepare the upcoming workforce to meet 21st century requirements. Our results have been small scale, with pockets of excellence that impact some of the 124,000 students in Delaware's public schools.

It is this framework for seeking excellence that we must keep in mind as we begin to hear more and more about "Race to the Top" funding. As Gov. Jack Markell prepares to announce a strategic plan for education that aligns with the federal Race to the Top grant worth millions of dollars in education funding, it is imperative that we reframe the conversation around bold strategic changes that demonstrate our state's desire to be a groundbreaker in the educational movement across the country.

We are fortunate that Delaware already aligns with many of the educational principles and outcomes outlined by the Obama Administration. U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, most recently applauded Delaware for its efforts in beginning to address strategies to transform the existing education system. We are moving in the right direction.

What we as a state must do is engage all significant players, business leaders, legislators, educators, parents and our respective communities in a movement that demonstrates our desire to reflect outstanding achievement where our children are concerned. What does this excellence mean?

- Making sure that high quality teachers are leading classrooms. Teachers should receive compensation that aligns with their skills and further supports the increased achievement level of their students.
- Allowing school administrators to demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities in guiding the activities in their buildings.
- Allowing all school staff to own what occurs in their building.
- A commitment to ongoing high-quality professional development that will support transformational change school wide.
- Reviewing the criteria for equitable funding to ensure charter schools and public school can stand beside each other in a manner that is supportive and not punitive.
- Holding schools accountable for providing quality service to all constituents. We do not have the luxury of allowing poor-performing schools to continue operating in a manner that requires students to be marginalized because of inadequate performance. Systems need to be put in place that allows

such schools to be "fast tracked" to improve their performance levels.

Educators, business leaders, community members and legislative representatives need to come to the table to discuss how such changes might occur statewide.

As head of Kuumba Academy Charter School, every day for us begins with a renewed commitment to excellence. I expect excellence from our students, and in turn, our students and parents expect nothing less from our teachers and staff.

Race to the Top calls for states to establish innovative strategies in holding professionals accountable for results. Race to the Top calls for innovations that will challenge our existing education systems. And that is "OK."

We are poised to reframe the conversation around education in this state. Delaware has players on the restructuring team that are incubating and perfecting bold ideas. Transformational change can be seen in regular public schools and public charter schools. Each high performing school is an asset to the state's "Education Portfolio" of public schools.

All schools must be provided with opportunities to think, and where possible work outside the box.

They must be given freedom and flexibility to allow students to move in different directions that demonstrate their ability to master subjects that exemplify excellence. Incubating new ideas in a setting that allows teachers to readily change ideas to better support students should become the new norm, not the exception.

It is my hope that a variety of constituency groups will strongly support the governor's application for Race to the Top funding. Alliances of all supporters in the state coming together to ensure that we have an informed, academically talented world-class workforce will allow Delawareans to soar into the future.

---