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NYC schools leader challenges educators

Cerf encourages reforms suggested by Vision 2015

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

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DOVER -- More money and smaller class sizes alone aren't the answer to improving schools, Chris Cerf, New York City Department of Education deputy chancellor, told Delaware educators, policy makers and business leaders Friday.

Rather, bold reforms that challenge the current education system are required to make the kind of drastic improvements needed, he said.

"We're trapped in a comfortable cycle of incrementalism," Cerf said, later issuing the challenge, "Think about the possibility of change. Be courageous. ... Be willing to take the heat. You have to be unapologetic."

Cerf was the keynote speaker at the opening reception of a weekend conference on teacher compensation.

The conference, sponsored by Delaware State Education Association, Delaware Public Policy Institute and Vision 2015, continues today with panel discussions on alternative models featuring experts from across the nation.

New York City won the 2007 Broad Prize for Urban Education, an award honoring large urban school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among poor and minority students.

Cerf's district already has implemented some of the changes suggested by Vision 2015, the extensive reform plan developed by a group of Delaware education, business and community leaders to revamp the state's school system. New York principals have been given more autonomy, funding now follows the student and varies according to the child's needs, teachers can earn bonuses based on student success, and every school receives a public report card.

Cerf encouraged Delawareans to attempt the kind of bold reforms suggested by Vision 2015, blaming the tendency to stick to "baby steps" on racism and the politics of stagnation.

Noting a study that found the average black 17-year-old reads at the same level as the average white 13-year-old, Cerf questioned what would happen if the average white 17-year-old was at that level.

"We would have an effort at the [magnitude] of the Manhattan Project," he said.

Citing low expectations as another factor, Cerf said too many educators have given up.

He also blamed the set-up of the U.S. school system, saying fragmentation of districts and board members elected by the minority who go to the polls make it easy for special interest groups, or just those with the loudest voices, to influence districts.

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