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## Lesson plan for a brighter future

**A bold vision exists for a world-class school system in this state. Does Delaware have the political will to make it a reality?**

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

Melanie Cord's kindergartner reads at a third-grade level. Her writing is on par with that of a first-grader. In math, she adds, subtracts, even multiplies. She helps correct her sister's second-grade homework.

Yet the Newark mother had to lobby school leaders for months to have Caroline, 5, tested to be placed into an advanced reading group and gifted class.

"The first three months of this year, she was rolling her eyes when she came home with homework. The homework would be about what the letter 'B' sounds like," Cord said. "She was frustrated."

Cord said she likes the teachers and administrators at Downes Elementary in the Christina School District. They work hard and care about the children. But, she said, in a state that neither mandates gifted education programs nor provides any funding for them, her daughter wasn't being served adequately.

"If she only gets challenged at home, she's going to get a skewed idea about what education is about. I didn't want her getting an attitude," Cord said. "I saw that first thing this fall."

Delaware public schools – which, fairly or not, have an undistinguished reputation – are making gains. But, as a growing number of educators, parents, students, business leaders and elected officials attest, greater potential exists.

They imagine a globally recognized education system that helps attract new businesses and retain talented employees, provides universal preschool opportunities so every child can arrive in kindergarten prepared to learn, and includes classrooms where innovative teachers have the freedom to experiment with new ways to challenge high-performing students and better reach struggling ones.

It would be a place where minority and low-income children achieve at the same rate as their classmates, where principals receive the funding they need to offer extra help for English language learners (ELL) and where earning is valued above testing. Campuses would be safe, children disciplined and parents welcomed.

It would be a system where politics, special interests and other adult issues didn't supersede children's needs.

Over the past 20 years, Delaware reformers have spent millions of dollars and loaded shelf space with now-dusty plans. But the greatest hurdle remains building the political will to make changes.

"Any large system is risk-averse," said Paul Herdman, president of the education nonprofit Rodel Foundation, a key leader in Vision 2015, the most recent reform effort. "One hurdle is fear of innovation because it may result in some failures. It's a cultural challenge we face."

Teachers union leaders see the same struggle.

"Changing one building at a time is a good incremental step, but that will take a long time," Delaware State Education Association spokeswoman Pamela Nichols said. "If you don't change the whole system, eventually, you hit a dead end."

Finding the money to pay for the changes is part of the hurdle. Vision 2015's reforms have been estimated to cost more than \$100 million over several years.

Joint Finance Committee and House Education Committee member Rep. Joseph Booth, R-Georgetown, likes some of the Vision 2015 ideas but isn't ready to cut a check. First, he said, the state needs to try to find money already designated to education and redirect it to the reforms, whether that money comes from cutting programs researchers identified as not working or taking advantage of some of the efficiencies outlined by a recent governor's committee report. Some of the suggested efficiencies will be harder to initiate than others. Union contracts and concerns about local control are just some of the sticking points.

"It's great to have a vision, but you need to have a way to pay for it," Booth said. "Before I change, I want to get rid of what doesn't work."

### **Improving test scores**

Despite some strong gains in student test scores in recent years and ranking No. 6 nationwide in per-student spending, Delaware's school system generally ranks midpack in national performance reports. Take last year's National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the nation's report card. The First State was in a six-way tie to rank 12th in fourth-grade reading and in a five-way tie for 19th in fourth-grade math. In eighth-grade reading, the First State's average score was the same as three states and behind 18 others. Delaware tied with Alaska for 26th place in eighth-grade math.

Statistics on Delaware minority student performance suggest greater concerns. In addition to achievement gaps between white and minority children in state test scores across grades and subjects, the percentage of students attaining a Delaware high school diploma is staggering: only half of black and Hispanic ninth-graders graduate in four years.

"My generation right now is not doing the best," said Darnell Patton, a junior at McKean High School in the Red Clay Consolidated School District. "I would like to see some more academic enrichment, something to bring my generation off the streets and see that it is possible for them to do anything."

That means educators pushing all children, he said. "The guidance counselors look for the students they know are going to go to college. Don't just come to the smart students."

Some news is hopeful. Across Delaware, innovative educators backed by involved parents and motivated children are succeeding. In New Castle County, Lewis Elementary students voluntarily attend "fun" Saturday classes for extra math, reading and writing help. In Kent, a model reading program at East Dover Elementary helps kindergartners master skills their parents likely didn't learn until primary grades. And in Sussex, an exemplary English Language Learner program at North Georgetown Elementary has closed achievement gaps despite almost no designated funding.

Lewis teacher Jennifer Saunders used a recent Saturday morning to help third- and fourth-graders cultivate their writing skills in preparation for the state test. As they analyzed a high-scoring paper from a previous Delaware Student Testing Program exam, Saunders showed them how detailed examples and explanations clarify points and make writing more exciting.

"If you can see it in this student's paper, you can remember to put it in your paper," she prompted as they dissected the essay line-by-line.

When the students broke away to begin putting the new skills to work on their own papers, Saunders and two co-teachers provided individual help. Saunders said Saturday classes – paid for by a \$6,500 grant from Wilmington City Council – are worth the investment because of "the extra little bits of information that can be jelled into their minds with a little extra time."

### **Preparing the work force**

Reformers want to see successes like this spread statewide, not just to help children, but because a mediocre school system – or even the perception of one – impacts the state's economy.

Businesses don't want to relocate to an area without a prepared work force, because they then must invest in retraining employees or recruiting talent from out of the area. And prospective employees may not want to come if they think

they must pay to send their children to a costly private school. Even parochial elementary schools such as Christ the Teacher run \$3,900 a year.

The No. 1 factor for a company deciding whether or not to relocate somewhere is whether there is an educated work force, said Bob Dayton, president of the Delaware Bioscience Association, a nonprofit trade association.

“A good school system will help with recruiting,” he said of companies’ ability to attract strong workers.

Like the rest of the nation, Delaware’s economy must evolve to survive, likely with new dependence on entrepreneurship and a knowledge-based economy.

“We are not going to be able to rely on one big entity like Bank of America or DuPont,” Herdman said. “If you want to be a magnet for talent, you have to create a place where people are going to want to bring their young families.”

The state’s business leaders have become key players in the education reform movement because “we want our businesses to stay competitive,” said Jim Wolfe, president of the Delaware Business Roundtable.

“It is a flat world,” he said. “It’s not just us competing with Maryland or Pennsylvania or New Jersey. We have to be able to compete worldwide.”

That is why the state’s top business executives joined with education and community leaders to create the Vision 2015 plan. Released in October 2006, the plan incorporates international research from the commissioned Boston Consulting Group as well as the results of focus groups with hundreds of Delaware teachers, parents, principals, students and community members.

The broad-ranging plan seeks to “set our sights high, with challenging expectations for every child, coupled with high-quality curriculum and additional instructional time.”

Model lessons aligned to a research-based statewide curriculum, diagnostic tests and classroom-based professional coaching would help teachers meet students’ needs. Assessments would measure individual student gains over time.

Learning would begin earlier with a greater state investment in preschool education. Annual license renewals and more required professional development would help ensure higher-quality early care programs.

Teachers across all grade levels would be encouraged to customize instruction to meet student needs, and top teachers would be recognized and rewarded with advanced positions such as mentor and master teacher.

They would advance “based on skills and performance, not seniority, with student achievement as one measure of performance.”

Principals would be given more authority – and accountability. Along with greater control over the use of staff, money and time, they would be held more responsible for student achievement and school performance. Families also would take a greater role. Greater efforts to involve and inform parents also would include stronger partnerships with community organizations and businesses.

And to make all of this possible, the state’s funding system would be overhauled. “We must have a simple and fair funding system where resources follow individual students and are allocated based on their needs,” the 2015 report said. “We know some students, whether struggling or accelerating, will need more resources than others.”

### **Teachers face challenges**

Parents such as Rhonda Shulman-Lattin, a mother of four, including two teenagers at Concord High School in the Brandywine district, are looking for change.

“There are many outstanding teachers and administrators, but they’ve been caught in a difficult political web,” she said, referring to the federal No Child Left Behind law that holds schools accountable to have all children reach state proficiency standards by 2014. “They are all powerless over No Child Left Behind. There are some things we can change on the state level, but they have huge pressures from the federal government.”

While plans such as Vision 2015 talk about greater expectations for students, Shulman-Lattin, co-chairwoman of Advocates for Children's Education, a grass-roots movement to reform the Delaware Student Testing Program, questions the academic pressures put on children today, saying some expect every child to be gifted.

"As a parent, you have influence over which [track] they are placed in," she said. Yet "you feel like you are walking a tight rope because there is pressure for children to proceed at an extremely accelerated rate and there's a perception if they don't proceed at that extremely accelerated rate that they will be left in the dust.

"It is simply not doable at this point of human evolution to say that everyone will be an astrophysicist," she said.

Taria Pritchett, a senior at A.I. du Pont High School in Red Clay, thinks Delaware needs to strengthen its graduation requirements, saying while students such as herself who take Advanced Placement and other high-level courses are pushed, many others don't take a rigorous course load.

"They are just barely getting by. They are not motivated by themselves; they are not motivated by their parents," she said.

### **Paying for Vision 2015**

Costs for the Vision 2015 plan have been estimated at more than \$100 million over several years. In a state facing a shaky economic forecast with an already lean budget, "there isn't any money to do this" has become a familiar refrain.

Legislators, while often voicing support for the plan's ideals, have given the reform effort no money. In their 2008 fiscal budget, they highlighted funding for a few Department of Education initiatives in line with Vision 2015 principles. Gov. Ruth Ann Minner has proposed \$100,000 in the 2009 budget to support school leader training for buildings in a network of pilot schools.

Rep. William A. Oberle Jr., R-Beechers Lot, is co-chairman of the Joint Finance Committee and a longtime champion of neighborhood schools. While he likes some of the ideas proposed by Vision 2015 and wants to explore efficiencies in the current system to help fund some of them, he said a major overhaul can't happen without major dollars, which Delaware doesn't have.

"There are ways that we can be creative in the short term, but the infusion of the sort of dollars that Vision 2015 speaks about is certainly beyond our capabilities to even begin to discuss this year, based on the revenue situation," he said.

He thinks a school solution takes more than political will to change; it also takes parental will to get involved.

"With the lack of parental involvement that I see in the school system and in the community, we can continue to throw money at the problem, but if the children aren't motivated ... it's an uphill fight," he said. "Some parents are just checked out of the system, and as a result, it has made it more difficult."

Another \$100 million from a state already among the top public-education funders in the country may seem like a tough sell. That's part of the reason the Business Roundtable fronted \$1.5 million to study how the state could better spend its \$1.65 billion education budget. The governor-appointed Leadership for Education Achievement in Delaware committee, which includes many of Vision 2015's key players, commissioned Boston Consulting Group to study Delaware spending. The global management consulting firm markets itself as a world leader in business strategy.

The committee's report, released in January, suggests Delaware and its 19 school districts and 17 charter schools could save more than \$158 million by better spending current education dollars. Suggestions ranged from what seem like easier changes, such as pooling school purchasing of natural gas, to others that will be hard political sells, such as offering educators compensation plans with retirement plans such as a 401(k) rather than pension, and not requiring schools to pay construction workers prevailing wage rates on school projects.

Oberle wants to explore some of the ideas, such as standardizing school design and construction and pooling the purchasing power of the districts.

### **Spending levels questioned**

North Georgetown Elementary ELL teacher Mary Norton doesn't pretend to have all the answers but says she knows one thing for sure: the current system is not serving her students. The state's ELL pupil population increased from 2,978 in 2002 to 6,416 last year. Meanwhile, schools continued to split the same \$1 million state pot until last year, when legislators approved an extra \$500,000. While the bump helped, it wasn't enough to keep pace with the population.

North Georgetown, for example, now gets \$212 per student, compared with \$530 six years ago. The shortage has forced educators to redirect local money, meaning other programs and student needs are cut.

Norton said legislators must change the way they fund ELL instruction, providing money based on student population rather than designating a set amount to be divided among all districts in the state as they do now.

"We don't want to be a line-item veto," she said. "How do we say to these kids that 'we can't support you anymore?'"

Many across the state see this as a time of hope. Much of what Delaware's education system of the future looks like could be decided this fall, as voters choose a new governor, 10 state senators and all 41 state representatives.

"I think this is a game-changing election year," Herdman said.

"There's a huge window of opportunity to pull these pieces together," he said. "You've got so much movement on the public and private-sector side for change. The governor and the Legislature need to recognize and capitalize on that momentum.

"If they don't, there could be a domino effect where that momentum slows or stops, and it could take a while to restart," Herdman said.

Herdman worries that without significant public-sector support – financial and moral – private-sector support will start to wane and be redirected to other priorities.

"We have an opportunity in the future to make holistic change," agreed DSEA President Barbara Grogg.

In a sense, the reformers have done all they can on their own. It's now up to Delaware residents to decide their vision for the state's schools.

"We've got to get to an awareness where folks are letting their public officials know there is a greater urgency for change than not change," Herdman said.

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