



Academic distress panel needs clone of retiring chairwoman

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Adrienne O'Neill doesn't mince words when she talks about the Youngstown City School District and what needs to be done to pull the urban system out of the state academic cellar. And, O'Neill has no patience for the internal politics that has been the bane of the district's existence. As chairwoman of the school district's Academic Distress Commission for the past two-years and six months, the veteran educator from Canton has focused like a laser beam on developing a recovery plan for the district.

There is now such a plan in place, with all the stakeholders — the Ohio Department of Education, the city school board, Superintendent Connie Hathorn, the administrative staff and the teachers — invested in it.

It's just a matter of implementing it, and therein lies the problem.

O'Neill has announced her retirement for health reasons and intends to leave June 30 or when the state superintendent of public instruction, Richard Ross, selects her replacement. It's fortunate Ross was O'Neill's predecessor on the commission, because the knowledge he has about the district and the key players will undoubtedly factor into his appointment.

We would urge the state superintendent, who has made it clear that the Youngstown system does not have the luxury of time when it comes to improving its state test scores, to find someone who has the same vision, passion and commitment as O'Neill to lead the recovery.

A clone of the outgoing chairwoman would be ideal, but short of that the commission needs a leader who, like O'Neill, has a clear understanding of his or her statutory responsibility.

The state-mandated panel was created in 2010 after the Youngstown district was placed in academic emergency as a result of its poor showing in the proficiency tests.

This declaration followed several years of fiscal emergency and watch, which also resulted in a state commission taking control of the district's finances.

It took several years of direct control of the budget for the oversight commission to eliminate the deficit and establish spending priorities, but in the end the Youngstown district was given a clean bill of health by the state auditor.

ADVICE FROM O'NEILL

As she gets ready to leave, O'Neill has important advice for officials of the school system and residents of the community at large: Believe that significant academic progress can be made.

“You have some very good teachers, some very good administrators — and there’s the possibility of turning students into some very high performers,” the chairwoman said in an interview with Vindicator writers.

She went on to say, “I don’t think enough people really believe Youngstown City Schools can perform at a high level.”

But, given the challenges confronting the district, belief alone won’t get the job done.

O'Neill and the other members of the commission were successful in putting the system on the road to academic recovery because they did not hesitate to use the authority given to them by state law to override decisions made by the school board.

The bottom line is that a school district seeking to shed its academic-watch designation needs a strong, steady hand guiding it. The Youngstown City Schools Academic Distress Commission has shown it is up to the challenge.

Now, the state superintendent of instruction must find a replacement for O'Neill who can hit the ground running.