

2007 Birmingham Public Schools Board of Education Candidate Forum

The cost to educate our students continues to outpace funding. Birmingham has cut over \$11 million in the past six years and will face another multi-million dollar deficit this year. What innovative methods of restructuring or streamlining costs would you propose in order to deliver superior educational services and improve the district's financial operations?

C. Conti: The district's Budget Deficit Reduction Plan has provided a good framework for addressing cost reduction. Moving forward, the district needs to continue its focus on cost reduction through the continuation of early retirement packages (for eligible teachers and staff) and by combining low-enrollment, elective classes within the district. Furthermore, the district needs to work with state legislature to address the growing legacy cost burden which will soon be responsible for over 20% of the district's expenses.

G. Heisey: The key to the District's budget problems is the State budget. This could be alleviated by increased State support for all schools and/or by reforming the state mandated pension and health care benefits each district must pay. The District could also target upcoming contract negotiations. The average state allocates 15.9% of their educational spending on benefits, while Michigan allocates 20.3%, ranking 4th. In the past three years, District spending on Basic Education increased 3.5% (Middle School dropped by 0.1%) while Total Executive Administration and Total Central Services increased by 8.7% and 9.2%, respectively. Cuts in these latter areas must be made.

R. Lawrence: I will continue to focus in two major directions: 1) Internally we are reviewing the delivery and cost of transportation. At the high school level we make provisions to transport nearly 2,600 student, yet the average high school daily bus load is around 400 students. We have to rationalize the delivery of this service. I supported the move to contract the operation of substitute teachers, and that's been working very well. Contracting other services is also an avenue of exploration. We have contracted food service operations with tremendous success; while I support further exploration of contracting, we must carefully evaluate the full cost/benefit analysis for each option before moving forward. 2) Externally we continue to lobby the state for major changes in the operation of the state mandated pension program. Projections show that the change in teacher pension contribution requirements for 2007/2008 will cost BPS nearly \$266 per student (or \$2.1 million), contrast that with the current budget deal that proposes an increase of \$49 per student and you can see the difficulty. Lansing has created this problem, and Lansing must fix this problem because it is putting the state's public education system in jeopardy while perpetuating the fiction of a healthy pension plan the teachers - it's not a stretch to say that without action the entire system faces potential collapse.

T. McCardell: Any change in a school district needs to include representation from all parties involved. One of the great strengths of this district is the community collaboration when change needs to occur. We need to prioritize what we value as a

community to determine what next steps to take. I would not profess to have a solution for the problems that face our district as a result of the funding deficit. I do, however, value the superior services we are able to provide, despite having to make more and more cuts. My job as a Board Member would be to be part of the collaborative effort to come to solutions that will not sacrifice the standard we value.

C. Motlagh:

- 1) There are legacy costs such as retirement which state of Michigan mandates but does not adequately fund. Since this problem exists in all districts, there is a chance[albeit very small one in the next three to five years] that the State may bow to pressure and finally fund what it mandates and/or mandate only what it funds.
- 2) Apply an operational impact test to future capital expenditures to favor projects that are friendly to operational costs and earth resources.
- 3) Revisit “school of choice”.
- 4) Revisit “outsourcing” where there may be large pay-offs and little impact on quality and/or safety.
- 5) Entice business community to rent and use schools for after school hours and meet businesses’ needs.

Should the Birmingham Public Schools work with the communities it serves to develop service sharing partnerships to combine district resources, i.e. facilities? If so, please provide two practical examples.

C. Conti: I believe that the district should work to develop service sharing partnerships where practical. Sharing resources for elective classes that incur low enrollment is a good example of combining district resources. Depending on district enrollment and demand for various offerings, resource sharing could also be accomplished in the areas of arts and athletics which may also reduce the need for various facilities.

G. Heisey: The District wastes money by duplicating facilities. The recent demolition of the Groves swimming pool to build a bigger pool to accommodate diving and then duplicating that at Seaholm is wasteful, especially when Groves has a critical classroom shortage. Instead of trying to make every school equal, sharing of unique facilities should be a priority. While the construction was accomplished with bond funds the significantly increased maintenance costs come out of operating funds that takes money away from education. The District could also explore initiatives with other Districts to share facilities and provide more efficient services such as transportation.

R. Lawrence: BPS does work with each of the eight municipalities that it serves - but leveraging that many communities is a complex equation. In a more businesslike relationship we partner, along with 11 other school districts, in the International Academy. That effort has generated national recognition and is a perfect example of how sharing works - I support the continuation of that effort and efforts which emulate that program. I'd like to see an expansion of coordinated community education programs that leverage regional resources. I support how BPS services the Clawson districts school buses and would like to see us expand that type of opportunity. Relationships like that create win/win situations (Clawson saves money, BPS earns a revenue stream). Thinking broader, I would explore ways in which we could coordinate bus fleets between districts to emulate a regional school transportation system. Such an effort might provide significant saving, but that could only be practical if the mandated drive to coordinate school calendars on a statewide basis is implemented.

T. McCardell: Birmingham Public Schools should most certainly partner with the communities it serves. I strongly believe that a district should be open to sharing resources. A district should look at opportunities to maximize the use of its facilities both as a service to the community and as a source of revenue. BPS already does this by providing facilities to church and youth groups and recreational sports teams. I would support further utilizing our facilities to enhance programs for our local, non-profit, community-based groups. The successes of such groups further enhance the collaboration of the schools and the community.

C. Motlagh: One area would be sharing of some sport facilities. For example schools from neighboring districts in close proximity of our schools could use our swimming pools while we use their tennis courts or vice-versa. Some specialized classes with small enrollments could be combined. Most classes like this are high school courses and high school students have easier time of meeting more demanding schedules that include specialized classes at a neighboring high school. To go further would mean near consolidation of districts. There is no harm to have a study group look at this issue. There are some very complex fiscal, governmental, cultural and logistic issues that would need to be addressed.

As a Board Member, how will you ensure continuous improvement and implementation of the strategies set forth in the district's Strategic Plan?

C. Conti: As a district, continuous improvement and implementation of the latest teaching methodologies is imperative to remain a top-tier district into the 21st Century. The Strategic Plan provides a road map encompassing the district's mission, objectives, beliefs, and strategies. Like any good strategic plan, the key is the measurement of results against the plan and making any required adjustments to ensure that the spirit of the plan and its key objectives are met.

G. Heisey: The single most important way the Board can ensure continuous improvement in the Strategic Plan is to prioritize limited financial resources toward academic success of the students. This would include eliminating duplication of resources whenever possible, continue exploring the use of contract staff in all positions except in the classrooms, reducing Administration costs, pressure Lansing for pension and health care relief, and seek reduction in benefit costs in upcoming contract negotiations. The professional staff must receive adequate finances to implement the Plan, evaluate its success, and make necessary adjustments for improvement. Since the Plan is fluid, the Board must update frequently.

R. Lawrence: That's an easy question; we are just about to enter the process of completely reinvigorating the strategic plan. The strategic process at BPS ensures that goals and objectives direct the action teams charged with implementation of action plans supporting the goals. We track that process through regular reports to the board and annual reviews of the entire plan by a group of system wide stakeholders comprised of nearly every representative group in the community. At a higher level I support the professional learning community initiatives that are growing within the district. These programs provide a dynamic process that will enrich our children's education by allowing our professional teaching staff to expand, share, and distribute their expertise across the entire BPS system.

T. McCardell: Continuous improvement is the responsibility of all stakeholders. Every person has a role to fulfill. As a Board Member, I would participate in committees when appropriate, contribute ideas, facilitate collaboration, and engage in critical thought.

Evaluation of a Strategic Plan is built right into a plan. People are assigned responsibility for the implementation of strategies to achieve a goal. If a goal is not reached, the plan is not declared operational. If I recognized that a strategy is not being implemented, I would not support the goal as operational. At that point, we would need to evaluate whether the goal is not attainable, or if the strategies are not viable means to the desired end. The process would include discussions with the Strategic Planning Team. Solutions would also be an effort of that Team. I would ensure both continuous improvement and the implementation of a Strategic Plan by challenging the group members, throughout the processes of both, to adhere to the high standard set forth.

C. Motlagh: As a board we will undoubtedly keep up with the best practices in the state and the rest of the country and I hope the rest of the world in math and science. The plan is an ever evolving document that the committee will rework this coming year. I will volunteer to serve on the strategic planning committee and will urge for more long term solutions to the fiscal problem of the district. I would also support the efforts of the superintendent so he can guide the district forward academically, culturally and ethically despite our budget shortfalls.

What distinguishes you from the other candidates?

C. Conti: What I believe distinguishes me most from the other candidates is my strong financial background and sound decision-making skills. I have a proven track record of working with troubled companies and determining cost reductions and capital budgeting. In addition, I approach issues and ultimately make decisions with the highest degree of objectivity and integrity. Further, having been appointed by the Birmingham City Commission to the Investment Committee, Retirement Board, and Health Care Committee, I have previous experience serving as a Citizen Trustee on behalf of the City.

G. Heisey: I have a desire for the District to be successful in every way. The biggest obstacle facing the Board is budgetary constraints. I have offered unique suggestions on how additional funds from outside and inside the District could be realized and then used for academic endeavors. I believe my budgetary and analytical skills as a research veterinarian who has managed large departments and budgets will enable me to assist the Board in developing budgets. I am also the candidate who is stressing the importance of a Board that will support the Administration, but also be responsive to the community's needs.

R. Lawrence: My professional background working on complex financial transactions allows me to understand and communicate complicated financial matters to the board and the greater community. I've been doing that through my blog (www.roblawrence.blogspot.com) for years. I've also developed a strong working relationship with our legislators in Lansing and I use those connections to support our schools. Service on the board is a labor of love that is shared by my entire family and I would be honored to continue to serve as a member of this board for the next 4 years.

T. McCardell: I have a background in the field of K-12 education and experience at the administrative level. My perspective is further enhanced by the time that I have spent volunteering in this district at the building and district level. I have demonstrated a commitment to the students of Birmingham Public Schools and an ability to partner positively with the staff, the administration, and the community. Please visit www.voteterri.org for more information.

C. Motlagh: I truly bridge the chasm between the young and the old in the district. At 62 I am a twenty seven year resident and the proud father of a 38 year old Groves graduate and a five year old just starting her academic journey. I am the only one who is currently a teacher. I am the only one that is calling for a fifteen to twenty year plan for the district. Long range planning is my specialty and the subject of my doctoral dissertation. I am the only one with first-hand knowledge of schools in other parts of the world.