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IPS needs leadership overhaul

The challenges facing Indianapolis Public Schools are daunting. The socioeconomic level of its students and their families, fiscal constraints, and a necessary heightened focus on security issues are just a few, but all contribute to high dropout rates, low academic achievement, achievement gaps between middle-class and low-income children and declining enrollment.

These challenges and the effects raise legitimate questions as to whether the currently construed governance structure of an elected school board can provide the vision, accountability and support needed to implement and sustain necessary reforms.

While calculations of graduation rates vary greatly, a recent study noted that IPS graduates 30 percent of its students, ranking it just above Detroit and Cleveland for the lowest graduation rate in the country.

Community investments in economic development efforts such as tech-advocate TechPoint, cultural tourism or the Super Bowl will not provide the expected returns if our students cannot hold or create jobs, appreciate the arts, or possess the abilities needed to orchestrate community events.

School boards and superintendents across the country have confronted similar challenges of declining enrollment,



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Commentary

declining state funding, a mismatch between the location of school buildings and school-age children, and persistent low achievement. Those that have resolved these challenges successfully have done so only after radically restructuring their governance model. What options does Indianapolis have if the current governance arrangement of IPS is not working? Cleveland, New York, Chicago and Boston reconstituted the manner by which they governed the public schools. New York has full mayoral control of public schools. Chicago, Boston and Cleveland have mayoral appointment of the school board. Other cities have some hybrid of formal and informal mayoral influence.

The current governance of IPS has not been able to halt its decline and effect sustained reform. A well-thought-out, deliberate, significant change of governance is needed. While a change to mayoral control or mayoral appointment would guarantee nothing, it would provide IPS with a new set of possibilities. A new governance structure could be permanent, time-limited or subject to review by the General Assembly or the people of Indianapolis.

The success of a new governance structure and true reform would require leadership of a broad-based civic alliance. Past reform efforts have not succeeded perhaps in part because they did not address the governance of IPS. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan led the turnaround of Chicago public schools and has strongly advocated for the reform of public education and its governance. The department's

\$4.4 billion "Race to the Top" initiative and \$650 million "Invest in What Works and Innovation Fund" are both designed to improve curricula and instruction. These federal efforts, along with local efforts such as The Mind Trust, provide those committed to improving educational attainment with the resources and ideas necessary for bold experimentation and achievement.

A new IPS governance model must include four elements to succeed:

■ **Transparency**—Public meetings, hearings and reports on a regular basis are a must.

■ **Strong oversight**—Local public officials and civic leaders must insist on verifiable measures of performance.

■ **Defined metrics of success**—All must agree on what success means, which must include test scores, graduation rates, gains in teacher quality, transportation, student health and safety, and financial success.

■ **Willingness to expend political capital for community success**—City, civic and business leadership must make concrete commitments. For too long, Indianapolis has witnessed the failings of one of its primary educational institutions. If broadly supported and diligently implemented, a bold change may provide the catalyst required for sustainable success for the benefit of Indianapolis. •

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