

Denver Post

URL: http://www.denverpost.com/guestcommentary/ci_3609995

Let's "close" state education board

March 19, 2006

By Tony Lewis

When a statewide elected body fails to represent the people of Colorado, what action is left other than to replace it with a group that has both the wisdom and experience necessary to make important decisions?

When an institution fails to fulfill its basic mission, fails the very people that are represented by it and fails in every attempt it makes to improve itself, what course of action is left but to dissolve it and to begin again?

I'm talking about our State Board of Education. It is, in all manners possible, failing our principals, teacher, parents and, most importantly, our children.

The latest salvo in a self-imposed war of idiocy was seen at the March 9 state meeting when the board debated whether or not to censure Overland High School teacher Jay Bennish. This day-long debacle was conducted at the sacrifice of more important educational business.

Unfortunately, this is hardly the only incident of its type that the board has engaged in over the last four or five years. This is just the latest in a steady pattern of partisan bickering, posturing and gamesmanship - all at the expense of improving education for all of Colorado's students.

Rather than address the critically important education challenges facing our state - high school dropout rates, low achievement by low-income and minority students, remediation of college freshmen and incredibly low rates of college graduation, just to name a few - the members of the State Board of Education have tried to censure individual teachers, punted on clarifying important fifth-year high school programs, ignored the need for state leadership in online education and have continued to create rules and regulations that stifle school and district reform efforts.

Much like the teachers and administrators at Manual High School, individual board members are trying their darnedest to make things better and to actually improve education in Colorado, but, as a group, they are clearly unable to do so. The care and concern of each member of this board is obvious; however, the lack of action to address critically important educational problems and the lack of action to make education better in this state are unacceptable.

Just like DPS officials did in the case of the failing Manual High School and the state did in the case of Cole Middle School, someone needs to ask whether this failed structure should continue. If this group of elected officials can't seem to get its act together, put partisan differences aside and make education better, shouldn't we start over by closing it down and reconstituting it?

Some would argue that once the current board configuration of eight members (an anomaly of adding our last congressional district) returns to a seven-member board (when the at-large seat goes away in 2008), there will be no need for change, the board will function well again. But let's be clear - it's not about having a majority of either party that will lead this board to competency. This is about changing a board culture of failure to a culture of success. The board must take the mantle of leadership in setting and acting on a vision for education in Colorado.

A strong governor is in a position to do what must be done: advocate for a ballot measure that changes the current elected board to an appointed one. A board (and commissioner of education) appointed by the governor, confirmed by the Senate and mandated to represent all regions of the state, could include people with the skills and experience to reform our education system.

To accomplish this change, the members of the State Board of Education should be paid. In order to attract the highly qualified, thoughtful and committed people you need to oversee the state's education system, the position cannot be a volunteer one.

It is time to shut it down and start over with a real plan that embraces all kids. Our children deserve better. Our state deserves better. It is time to "close" the State Board of Education - as New Mexico, Florida and Ohio have done - and reconstitute it in a form that moves beyond political bickering and partisanship to one that is truly concerned with our children's future.

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