

## A Vision for BUFFALO PUBLIC Education

### INTRODUCTION

Currently, the Buffalo Public School District (BPSD or District), like most urban districts, manages a monolithic school system that is failing to meet the needs of the majority of its students. The result is a school district with a graduation rate hovering around 50% that is aggravated by an inability to prepare graduates for college and careers. We must seize the opportunity to break this generational cycle of educational failure.

What we imagine for the BPSD over the next five years is the transition to a robust portfolio of high performing schools that greatly increases the options available to parents and their children. We believe we can attain the highest quality of public school achievement by developing multiple pathways to place effective high performing teachers in front of every student.

This portfolio will consist of greatly improved traditional public schools, increased number of high performing charter schools, the creation of career path schools and curriculum, and an increased number of criterion based schools. There will not be a single school solution but a variety of approaches to serve the needs of every child.

### A SYSTEM OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS FOR CHILDREN

Our guiding principle will be that effective teaching counts the most. More than money, more than class size, more than even demographics. If we can find a way to provide an effective teacher for every classroom we can turn around our schools. How do we do that?

### PARENT AND STUDENT CHOICE

*"I'm here to hold up... these students as an example of what's possible in education if we were willing to try new ideas and new reforms based not on ideology but on what works to give children the best possible chance in life"*

*Barack Obama May 18, 2008*

Unfortunately the vast majority of Buffalo parents have only one option available for their children; enrollment in a failing school. Although the majority of children will continue to attend traditional schools, fixing traditional schools will take time most children can ill afford. As a matter of law and moral obligation, it is incumbent on the Board to provide a range of options to children as soon as possible.

1. **Expand High Performing Charter Schools:** The Board should seek to provide as many additional seats in high performing charters as possible for the start of the 2015-2016 school year. The Board should actively recruit high performing providers by offering space in vacant school buildings, co-location space in operating schools and an enhanced charter reimbursement formula. Given the wait lists at current high performing charter schools, there appears to be an immediate demand for 3,500 seats.
2. **Expand Criterion School Capacity:** Approximately 2,000 children apply but are denied admission to City Honors, Olmsted, da Vinci and Hutch Tech. The high demand for these schools makes a strong case for their expansion. The Board should plan to increase this option by 800 seats by 2015-2016.
3. **Career and Technical Education:** The district has many CTE (vocational offerings); however, some have long waiting lists (Emerson) while others lack the ability to provide certification upon graduation. The district should conduct an intensive inventory of current offerings with an eye towards providing programs in high demand that are also linked to career path and family supporting jobs.
4. **Recovery School District:** The Board should consult with SED to explore the feasibility of creating a recovery district for the lowest performing schools in the District. *State take over*
5. **Suburban Transfers:** Several higher performing suburban districts are projecting significant space availability for the upcoming school years. The District should explore the possibility of a transfer agreement for Buffalo students to provide immediate school choice options for students in failing schools. This should be considered as a short-term interim solution pending the development of the choice options described above.
6. **Opportunity Scholarships:** Consistent with NCLB legislation and regulation, *vouchers* implement scholarships for parent who choose to enroll their children in private schools in lieu of keeping them in focus or priority schools.

### STRUCTURAL REALIGNMENT

The finances of the District are currently structured largely for the benefit of adults over children. Underutilized buildings, bloated administrative payrolls, excessive health insurance costs and legacy contributions approaching twenty percent means that most of the resources of the District fail to end up anywhere near the classroom. The District should employ every effort possible to insure that the greatest amount of resources is closest to the student to enhance effective instruction. The District needs to realign itself in the following manner:

1. **Right Sizing Facilities:** The District operates facilities for anywhere from 40-50 thousand seats for a school population of 34,000. The District needs to develop a school facility plan that meets but does not exceed the school population.
2. **Management and Organizational Restructure:** Develop and implement policies and procedures for moving resources and decision making authority and accountability for results into school buildings and out of central

*retiree's health care* (with arrow pointing to "excessive health insurance costs and legacy contributions")

*active teachers health care* (with arrow pointing to "excessive health insurance costs and legacy contributions")

administration and reinvent and re-engineer central office administration to be an effective and desirable provider of support services to schools and school leaders.

3. **Health Care Reform:** Extend health care reforms to all the District's union agreements and retired employees.
4. **System and technology:** Review options for central registration, electronic payroll processing and other comprehensive system redesign.
5. **Reforming Governance:** Shifting the role of the Board of Education (BOE) from one that too frequently finds itself embroiled in day-to-day operations to one that provides oversight and long-term planning, while entrusting the superintendent and senior administrators to carry out this vision. This will allow the BOE to spend its time and energy on governance and leadership.
6. **Neighborhood Schools:** The board in collaboration with key stakeholders should develop a phased in approach to returning to neighborhood schools keeping in mind original concepts from the joint schools reconstruction project.
7. **Interscholastic Athletic Program:** The board should immediately embark on an effort to realign the BPS athletic program that would include regional teams and the availability of coaches proficient in the chosen sport.
8. **Special Education:** Review and begin implementation of the recently released special education audit conducted by the Council on Great City Schools.
9. **Safe Schools:** The district has made substantial progress in creating order in its schools with the new code of conduct and Positive Behavioral and Intervention Supports (PBIS) efforts. However, there continues to be a sense of disorder and violence in some schools and learning can not take place in such an environment. This must be immediately addressed with a goal that every school will be orderly and safe. How?

### NEW DEAL FOR TEACHERS

*"The field of school reform is finally focused on the right strategic lever. There is an expanding body of evidence that says the single most decisive factor in student achievement is excellent teaching"*

**Bill Gates. July 2010**

The Buffalo public school teachers have been working without a contract since 2004. The contract reflects a bygone era where teacher salaries and placement in the classroom were determined almost solely by the number of years a teacher has worked in the system.

Teaching ability, innovation, hard work, passion, dedication and care for students are the defining characteristics of good teaching. Unfortunately, none of these are taken into consideration in determining teacher pay, tenure or class assignment. Worse, this contract, and

its companion principal and administrators union contract, have virtually eliminated almost every administrative prerogative of the School District.

The District needs a new deal with teachers that recognizes the critical importance of teaching and elevates the profession as a career choice for our best and brightest. We can accomplish this with a contract that does the following:

1. **Increased Base Pay:** A substantial pay increase for many teachers is necessary to make up for inequities created by the step system and the failure of the parties to reach a new agreement for the last twelve years.
2. **Merit pay:** A system of merit pay should be implemented to reward good teaching and encourage our best teachers to work in our toughest schools. The District should negotiate an evaluation system with the BTF that considers student test scores, principal evaluation, peer evaluation and student and parent surveys. These will not only reward current teachers but attract the best teaching candidates to the District.
3. **Health care reform:** The District's current health care system is too costly and unsustainable. A new system needs to include greater individual choice to teachers, a system of health savings accounts, increased deductibles, and edited excessive coverage such as the cosmetic rider. The District also needs to implement an aggressive opt out alternative for retired teachers that better suits their actual health needs, provides them a financial incentive for doing so and reduces the District excessive legacy costs.
4. **Work rule reform:** Simply put, the authority for operating schools has to be returned to the District. This will require a major rewriting of the work rules, evaluation, seniority and hiring/termination portions of the contract.
5. **Professional Development:** It is very important that we recognize the inherent difficulty of teaching in an urban district and reinvest in our teachers by providing ongoing training and coaching in the best and most proven classroom techniques. Like the medical and legal professions, continuing education and training should be imbedded in the art of teaching.

### **INTERIM SUPERINTENDENT**

The Board should hire an interim Superintendent (2 year contract) who will be charged with planning and implementing the reconstruction plan described above. The Interim should be a strategist with extensive leadership experience who understands that it his/ her task to set up the district for a Permanent Superintendent to manage two years hence.

It is therefore essential that the person(s) selected to fill the interim position not only understand and completely "buy into" the BOE's strategy and position with regard to moving the BPSD

forward, but have the necessary skill sets and experience to develop and implement a plan that carries out the strategy. That person or persons will need to:

1. Be influential within SED so as to give SED the confidence that the BOE is on the right track; the interim needs to be able to "buy" some time and space for the BPSD from SED;
2. Be able to cut through the intrigues and various agendas of current administration officials bent on sabotaging reform efforts;
3. Have a wealth of experience in dealing with complex Collective Bargaining Agreement issues;
4. Be a person or persons who have no stake in being named the permanent superintendent, as the interim will need to be willing to take on entrenched interests;
5. Understand that the most valuable resources in the District are its human resources – starting with students, teachers and building leaders - and have a proven track record for effectively empowering teachers and building leaders;
6. Understand how to create a more entrepreneurial organization which is critical for moving the BPSD away from being exclusively in the business of operating and managing K – 12 public schools and more toward being in the business of providing high quality services to independent organizations that operate and manage public schools.

## **ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS**

The community and our students can ill afford the continued strife between the District and its critical stakeholders. We will immediately move to develop collaborative, meaningful partnerships with parents, the NYS Education Department, the business community and other critical partners.

There is no more critical stakeholder in the operation of the District than the parents who everyday send their kids to one of our schools. They should demand that we provide the best possible education for their children. Below are some of the immediate steps we can take:

1. The Board should offer a non-voting seat to the DPCC not unlike the current arrangement where a student representative has a seat with voice but not vote.
2. The District and DPCC should collaborate on a new parent engagement plan that maximizes parental involvement in the daily life of our schools.
3. District should explore with DPCC methods for increasing parental involvement and begin at the school level. A range of vehicles should be considered to include access to all City of Buffalo and district communication capabilities.
4. Closely evaluate mechanisms to provide input and involvement for all groups representing parents.

5. The district will explore the development and implementation of a Parent Center.

Over the past few years, the District has developed an adversarial relationship with NYS Education Department. We seem to have created a mindset that if only the State would leave us alone, we could fix our schools and provide high quality education to all students. This has not worked and we must reverse this course. SED, aside from being the state regulator of the District, offers immense resources to support the District in creating high performing schools for all students. The BOE must initiate immediate discussions with its interim superintendent to repair this damage and to create a supportive and collaborative relationship with SED.

The District should explore and implement collaborate partnerships with the many institutions of higher learning in Western New York. Some already exist, where others have been allowed to flounder. For example, the heart of the Early Middle College School is its relationship with Erie Community College yet that relationship has evolved to where ECC is no longer interested in maintaining its role.

In a similar sense, the District spends millions of dollars a year on staff development consultants, usually from consulting firms from other parts of the country. Many of the skills necessary for targeted staff development are contained within one or more of our local colleges and universities and we should quickly look to them to provide staff development and other supports.